

Miri Mikawa
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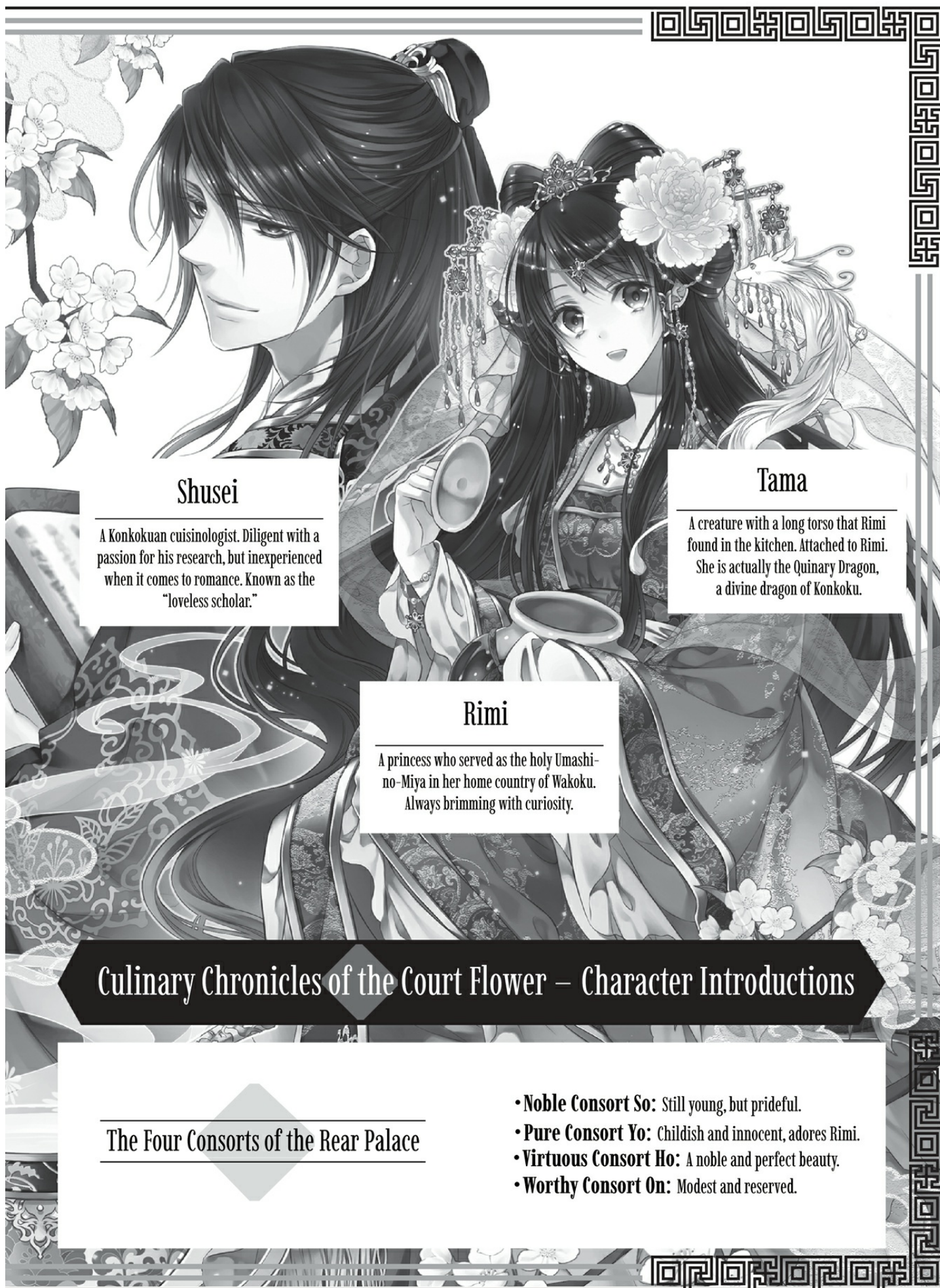
*Culinary
Chronicles
of the Court
Flower*



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Shusei

A Konkoku cuisineologist. Diligent with a passion for his research, but inexperienced when it comes to romance. Known as the “loveless scholar.”

Tama

A creature with a long torso that Rimi found in the kitchen. Attached to Rimi. She is actually the Quinary Dragon, a divine dragon of Konkoku.

Rimi

A princess who served as the holy Umashi-no-Miya in her home country of Wakoku. Always brimming with curiosity.

Culinary Chronicles of the Court Flower – Character Introductions

The Four Consorts of the Rear Palace

- **Noble Consort So:** Still young, but prideful.
- **Pure Consort Yo:** Childish and innocent, adores Rimi.
- **Virtuous Consort Ho:** A noble and perfect beauty.
- **Worthy Consort On:** Modest and reserved.



Jotetsu

A military officer who serves
as Shohi's bodyguard.



Hakurei

An enchantingly beautiful eunuch.
Serves Shohi directly.



Shohi

The emperor of the great empire
of Konkoku. Cruel and heartless.

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Shohi awoke to the gentle sound of breathing beside him.

The candles lit the night before had burned out inside their lanterns. They had been replaced by beams of morning sunlight, which slipped through cracks in the window to illuminate Rimi's sleeping face. Her hand still softly gripped Shohi's, just where it had been when he'd fallen asleep the night before.

Rimi's here.

The simple knowledge that the consort slept safely beside him was enough to fill the emperor with an indescribable sense of peace.

Shohi slipped his hand from Rimi's grasp, but her eyes didn't even flutter. It hurt Shohi to think of how exhausted she must have been, yet he also felt a sense of happiness knowing she could sleep peacefully in his bed. Before getting up, the emperor kissed her cheek softly. Rimi's breathing remained deep and steady. Satisfied, Shohi got up and left the bedroom.

Jotetsu was seated on the windowsill in the emperor's living chambers.

"Congratulations, Your Majesty. Your wishes have finally come true, eh?" the spy asked jovially.

Shohi had done nothing to prepare for bed the night before besides taking off his crown, so his clothes were wrinkled and in disarray. The emperor rang a bell to summon a servant. He'd need their help to make himself look presentable.

"There's nothing to congratulate me for," Shohi huffed. "She simply slept in my bed last night. Nothing happened."

"Just slept? Like a kid? What am I going to do with you, Your Majesty?"

"Quiet. I'm happy knowing that Rimi has returned safely. That's enough for me. I have to offer my thanks to you as well. You had something to do with her return, didn't you?"

"I'd worked out where she was being held. I was in the middle of figuring out how to get her off Ryo Renka's estate when Kyo Kunki arrived under your orders. So in the end, I didn't really do anything at all," Jotetsu explained with an apologetic smile. "But I'm curious. How did you know to send Kunki there?"

"Someone delivered a message to Keiyu that said Rimi was with Ryo Renka."

Jotetsu placed a hand on his chin and frowned.

“A message? Who could’ve possibly...”

“I’m not sure, but it turned out to be accurate. Moving on to more important matters... Jotetsu, were you working with Shusei to find Rimi? That’s what Hakurei told me.”

“Tch. Damned fox, sticking his nose where it doesn’t belong,” the spy said, his surprise quickly turning to anger.

The emperor approached Jotetsu and looked down at him.

“There’s no reason to be angry with him. When I thought about why Shusei would be working with you, I realized the true reason behind his betrayal. He never betrayed me at all. Isn’t that right?”

Shohi’s gaze was steady. He wouldn’t allow any lies or deflections. Jotetsu weathered the stare in silence for a while, but eventually, his stoic expression broke. The spy seemed uncharacteristically at a loss for what to do.

“Honestly... I don’t know how to answer that,” Jotetsu replied.

“Answer with the truth. Is Shusei’s betrayal an act? Is it all for my benefit?”

“The ‘truth’ is a tricky thing. I don’t really know the best way to explain it. So maybe you’d be better off asking the man himself.”

It wasn’t like Jotetsu to dance around a subject like that. From his expression, he truly seemed unsure how to answer.

“You’re saying if I ask Shusei, I’ll know? Then ask him I shall. I’ll get him to tell me once and for all who took Rimi as well.”

Jotetsu heaved a deep sigh.

“You’re going to dig that up? Rimi said she was invited to Ryo Renka’s estate, didn’t she?”

“What kind of fool would believe a story like that? I suspect once I find out who did it, I’ll also know why Rimi is hiding the truth.”

Shohi looked out to the garden, which was blanketed with gentle sunlight, and pursed his lips.

Chapter 1: The Weight of Judgment

I

The silk was smooth against Rimi's cheek. She felt cozy and warm. A scent also felt as if it was gently embracing her, a spicy, pine incense that had been scented onto Shohi's clothes.

I'm back by His Majesty's side.

In her hazy mind, halfway between sleeping and waking, Rimi felt an incredible sense of peace. She wanted to stay just like this forever.

But where is he?

With her eyes still closed, Rimi swept her hand around the bed trying to find Shohi, but she felt no sign of him. He must have woken up early to attend to his duties as emperor.

The consort reached out in another direction and found smooth fur beneath her fingers. It was Tama, the Quinary Dragon, the divine beast who granted the emperor the power to rule Konkoku. She was curled up beneath the silken covers and appeared to be enjoying a pleasant sleep.

The little dragon suddenly twitched and darted out from under the covers. Shortly after, Rimi heard a stampede of footsteps coming from outside, and then the door to the bedroom was thrown open.

Rimi jumped to her feet in shock. She could barely open her eyes before something barrelled into her, knocking the consort back onto the bed.

"My dearest! My dearest! Where were you?!"

Somebody was clinging to Rimi, squeezing her as they mewled. The consort blinked several times before finally properly opening her eyes to see who had tackled her. It was one of the four consorts, Pure Consort Yo.

"Consort Yo? What are you doing here?" Rimi asked.

While Yo restrained Rimi and rolled around on the bed with her, the other three consorts entered the room with strained smiles.

“So, you really are back. Well, I suppose I’m glad to see you,” Noble Consort So said primly as she approached the bed. She seemed to have tears in her eyes.

“Oh, I’m so glad... When you went missing, I couldn’t help but fear the worst,” Worthy Consort On said, tears rolling down her cheeks.

“Come now, Yo. Give her some space before you suffocate her,” Virtuous Consort Ho said, prying the wailing Yo away from Rimi while wearing a soft, relieved smile herself. “I do understand how you feel, though. A consort disappearing from the palace is unheard of. Whoever did it couldn’t have had good intentions. It’s not the sort of thing you expect someone to return from alive.”

Yo flopped down on the bed in a weeping, shuddering mess. Rimi, finally freed from her grip, hugged Yo tight.

“Thank you for worrying about me, Consort Yo,” Rimi said. She then turned her attention to the others. “And So, On, Ho, I’m so sorry for worrying all of you.”

The other three sat down on the bed. They held Rimi’s hands and gazed at her face as if to make sure she was genuinely unharmed.

“Did anything happen to you, Lady Rimi?” On asked shyly as she squeezed the future empress’s hand.

“I heard you were found at Ryo Renka’s estate. She’s the Vice Minister of Works, isn’t she? How did you end up there?” Ho asked, frowning.

“Out with it. Tell us who kidnapped you,” So added angrily. “His Majesty must give out such a grave punishment that this never happens again. Was it Ryo Renka?”

Rimi felt cornered. From the way Shohi had looked the night before, she knew the kidnapper would not be treated leniently. If she said that Chancellor Shu had taken her, he would undoubtedly be relieved of his duties. Even if he wasn’t, the emperor would never trust his chancellor again.

"I... Well... A lot happened. I received an invitation from Lady Renka. I simply enjoyed myself and did some cooking, I suppose."

So, On, and Ho all exchanged dumbstruck looks. Yo grabbed Rimi by the collar and started shaking her.

"Enjoyed yourself?! Are you insane?! We're supposed to believe that?!" the Pure Consort demanded.

"I-It's true!" Rimi said with a weak smile as cold sweat trickled down her brow. "I shouldn't have gone off without saying anything... Hee hee?"

All of the consorts glared at Rimi. Their gazes said one thing: *Liar*.

I figured they wouldn't believe it...

Just as the future empress began to think that she wouldn't be able to maintain her flimsy smile any longer, the consorts were interrupted.

"Excuse me, four consorts," someone called softly from the door.

It was Sai Hakurei, director of the rear palace, wearing his characteristically enchanting smile. He offered the four consorts a bow.

"I must ask you to return to the rear palace. His Majesty only granted you a brief visit to see Rimi for a moment," the eunuch said.

"You're no fun," Yo said, sticking out her lip.

"Forgive me, but you've confirmed Rimi is in good health. Don't you think that's more than enough? You'll have plenty of time to see each other," Hakurei said with an apologetic smile. He then turned to Rimi, and his smile broadened. "Welcome home, Rimi. I'm glad you're safe."

The eunuch's concern was clear in his voice. Rimi could tell he'd been just as worried about her as the four consorts.

"Thank you, Master Hakurei. I'm sorry I worried you," Rimi said.

"Don't be. My worries are insignificant. I've sent for a handmaid, so please, get dressed. Jotetsu will be coming to escort you after that."

"Am I going back to the Palace of the Water Spirit?"

"No, you'll be going to the Hall of Law and Culture."

The name was familiar. Rimi searched her memory for what she'd learned in preparation for the Executive Audience. If she was right, it was where the chancellor carried out his duties.

"Chancellor Shu and Ryo Renka are being held there at the moment. His Majesty has questions for the three of you," Hakurei explained.

Here we go.

When it came to what had happened to Rimi, Shohi had no intention of leaving anything unanswered. Hakurei had said that Kojin and Renka were "staying" at the Hall of Law and Culture, but it would probably be more accurate to say that they were being held there as suspects.

Chancellor Shu can't afford to tell the truth about what he did. I can't either. But what about Lady Renka?

Ryo Renka had placed Shusei and Kojin in a room together while pretending she wasn't aware of Rimi's true identity. The consort had no idea what her plan had been when doing all of that. She didn't seem like a cruel person, but her thinking was impossible to understand.

After the four consorts left with Hakurei, Rimi got changed. A ruqun, the color of autumn leaves, had been prepared for her in advance. Once the consort finished changing, she sat on the sofa and petted Tama, who had curled up in her lap. The little dragon flipped on her back, demanding belly rubs. She seemed to be quite content now that she was home again.

"Hey, Rimi," Jotetsu said, appearing midway through Tama's belly rub. "Glad to see you and the Quinary Dragon are safe and sound."

Jotetsu walked over to Rimi and poked Tama on the head. The dragon seemed annoyed by the gesture, pawing at the fur on her head as if to tidy it.

"I guess it doesn't like me touching it. You had a hell of a time though, huh, Rimi? It did make me laugh when I saw you working in the kitchen considering the type of situation you were in," the spy commented, giving the consort a light pat on the head.

Rimi looked up at Jotetsu's rugged face and recalled that the man had apparently been working with Shusei to find her.

“Thank you, Master Jotetsu. You were working with Master Shusei to find me, right?”

Jotetsu simply shrugged.

At Ryo Renka’s estate, Rimi had been able to face Shusei directly and ask him a question that she’d been holding inside for a long time. Then Shusei had revealed that he’d joined the Ho House both to dispel the gloom he felt toward Kojin and to help Shohi.

The scholar had claimed that as long as he was intent on hounding Kojin, he would be an enemy. But if Rimi could banish the emptiness he felt, then the consort believed that she could bring the old Shusei back.

And yet...

Something continued to eat at Rimi. When Shusei had confirmed her guess as to his motives, she could still feel some faint shadow of deception behind it.

But the consort didn’t want to think of him deceiving her.

“Master Jotetsu, do you know what Master Shusei is really after?” she asked.

“His Majesty asked me the same thing. Are you asking because Shusei helped me find you?”

“I wasn’t sure what to think until a little while ago, but...”

“I’m pretty sure I know exactly what he’s thinking. Better than you or His Majesty, in fact.”

I knew it. He and Master Shusei have always worked together.

After Aisha, the princess from Saisakoku, had disappeared, there was a moment when Rimi had been looking for Shusei. Jotetsu had then come to her and said something.

“End of the day, Shusei’s the enemy. Never forget that.”

Why had Jotetsu been so intent on reminding her of the obvious? It was like he was trying to keep her from seeing something. It would’ve been easy to let it slip by without a second thought.

“But the truth might not be what you want to hear,” the spy added.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Exactly what it sounds like. Now, come on. His Majesty’s waiting. Shu Kojin and Ryo Renka too.”

As Rimi stood, Tama hopped out of her lap and scurried off toward the bedroom. Apparently, she planned on staying there.

Tama has been so at ease with His Majesty lately. She even sleeps in his bedroom and waits there for him. At this rate, she might end up spending more time with him than me.

The consort steeled herself for what was to come as she followed Jotetsu.

I need to find some way to keep a rift from forming between the chancellor and His Majesty.

It wasn’t pleasant thinking about defending someone who’d tried to kill her. But if Rimi allowed judgment to fall on Kojin, the emperor would be the one who suffered in the end. The chancellor had been cruel, but he’d been trying to help Konkoku. Chancellor Shu was a heartless man, but as long as he was using his mind to support the empire, he was indispensable to Shohi.

But could Rimi prevent the emperor from losing his chancellor?



Things are getting lively. Are we finally getting started then?

The night before, Vice Minister of Works Ryo Renka had been escorted from her estate to the Hall of Law and Culture. She was pacing the walkways, still disheveled from sleep, when she noticed people had begun to arrive. The interrogation would be starting soon.

I need a smoke first. I’m going to fall apart at this rate. The Hall of Law and Culture is supposed to be Kojin’s place. He ought to be able to provide some tobacco, at least.

Renka had heard that they were both being held in the Hall of Law and Culture. Since few of the rooms were actually being used and all the doors were left open, finding Kojin didn’t take long. All she had to do was find the room with the closed door.

“Morning, Kojin. Nice day, isn’t it?” Renka said, opening the door without bothering to ask.

The chancellor was reading at a desk by a window. His expression was brimming with scorn as he looked up.

“How dare you show your face to me, Renka?” he spat.

“I don’t remember you saying not to,” the vice minister said as she entered with a smile. She didn’t bother waiting for an invitation before sitting on a sofa and calmly crossing her legs.

“I don’t even see why I’m being held here. This is all your fault,” Kojin said. “You knowingly lured me to your estate while you had Setsu Rimi there.”

“I disagree. This all started because you tried to make Setsu Rimi disappear. We both know who’s at fault here. But then, you’ve always had a tendency to ‘forget’ anything inconvenient to you. It’s your worst quality. You always needed someone to knock a little sense into you from time to time, but ever since Seishu left, nobody’s had the guts to do it.”

“You never saw me as anything more than an accessory to Seishu, did you? So what did I do to deserve the honor of your attention now?”

Renka gave a cunning smile and brushed a few stray hairs from her cheek.

“I’d guessed you were the one who’d tried to make Setsu Rimi disappear. Once I realized who the girl was, I knew you hadn’t changed a bit. Anything for the empire, right? Duty, love, peace? None of that matters. You only care about one thing: the government. Same old Kojin.”

“You’re criticizing me? *You*? You, who intentionally abandoned any effort at success just to spite a foolish emperor?”

“Oh, you misunderstand. It’s praise. As long as that never changes, it doesn’t matter how much of a villain you become. People will still rely on you.”

Kojin met Renka’s grin with a scowl.

“Well, we should both get ourselves ready. The interrogation is starting soon,” the vice minister said as she stood up. “On that note, can you provide some tobacco? Oh, and a brush, some ink, paper, things like that? That’s

actually why I came here.”

“You think I’m just going to arrange that for you?” Kojin asked coldly.

“Please and thank you,” Renka said with a wave as she turned to leave.

“Selfish brat,” Kojin muttered.

Her lips curled into a slight smile.

You never did like how I acted, did you? Well, the feeling’s mutual. To think we still have something in common after all this time.

Renka smiled at the irony.

Now, what happens next? I suppose that all comes down to the emperor.

II

A pair of guards stood watch over the Hall of Law and Culture’s entrance. The gate was usually unguarded, but with Kojin and Renka suspected of kidnapping, extra precautions had apparently been taken.

Jotetsu and Rimi strode through the gate and down the walkways, passing several rooms. Strangely, none of them seemed to be in use. The complex didn’t seem as if it was usually populated by bureaucrats either. It almost seemed abandoned.

“I’ve brought Rimi, Your Majesty,” Jotetsu said, stopping in front of a room that faced out toward the gardens. The spy then bowed and Rimi followed his lead.

As she looked up from her bow, she noticed Shohi sitting at a round table in the center of the room, accompanied by Minister of Revenue, To Rihan, and Minister of Rites, Jin Keiyu.

“Come. Sit,” Shohi ordered. Rimi nervously complied, taking a seat alongside him. The emperor then looked at Jotetsu. “Fetch Kojin and Renka.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” the spy said before departing.

“So, according to His Majesty, you were invited to Ryo Renka’s estate. Did you have a good time?” Keiyu asked, leaning forward with an amused look.

Rimi nodded stiffly.

“Yes. I did some cooking and enjoyed my time there,” she said, earning a snicker from the jovial minister.

“Enough games, Keiyu. And you, Setsu Rimi. The truth, now,” Rihan demanded.

“That is the truth...” Rimi insisted.

“So, you’re sticking to that, are you?” Rihan said.

“Enough,” Shohi said, cutting the brutish minister’s interrogation short. He glared steadily at the doorway. “Once we know who the kidnapper is, we’ll know Rimi’s reason for insisting on that story. There’s no need to attack her. After we hear from Kojin and Renka, the truth will come out. And here they are now.”

The chancellor, clad in a black shenyi, appeared. The square doorway almost seemed like a picture frame with the garden as its background. Standing tall and resolute, he seemed like a steel, unwavering statue.

Kojin gave a sharp bow before entering. Rihan and Keiyu both stood to return the bow. Rimi was about to do the same, but Shohi reached to the side and grabbed her. He was glaring straight at the chancellor. Her suspected kidnapper deserved no hospitality, it seemed.

His Majesty seems so angry. I’m worried.

Chancellor Shu took a seat and calmly surveyed the others at the table.

“Kojin. I want the truth,” Shohi began.

“Regarding what, Your Majesty?” Kojin asked impassively.

“What was Rimi doing at Ryo Renka’s estate? And why were you there, with Shusei, no less?”

“I was visiting Renka to see if she intended to become our new Minister of Personnel. When I arrived, I found Lord Ho already there. Believe me, I was just as surprised as you,” Kojin explained. “As for why he was there, you’ll have to ask Renka. I can’t begin to guess why Setsu Rimi was there either. She was also already in attendance when I arrived. As she’s present, perhaps you’d be better

off asking her.”

“Rimi insists she was invited there,” Shohi said.

“Does she now...” the chancellor uttered, flicking a glance at Rimi. Outwardly, he was expressionless, but the consort could tell he was surprised that she wasn’t accusing him. “Well, if that’s what she says, then it must be so.”

“Chancellor Shu, I have a great deal of respect for you. That is exactly why I hope to hear the truth from you. I know you have your own methods and approaches,” Rihan said in a low, intimidating voice. The scar beneath his right eye contorted as he spoke.

“I’ve told you all the relevant details,” Kojin said coolly.

“Relevant details? Not exactly the truth, is it?” Keiyu prodded, but the chancellor ignored him, choosing instead to deliver a piercing gaze at the emperor.

“I’ve given you my answer. I have nothing more to say. You drag me to the palace, lock me up, and submit me to an interrogation? With all due respect, you have humiliated me, Your Majesty. I don’t think I can take any more of this. Excuse me,” Kojin said before standing and turning to leave.

“Stop!” Shohi barked, jumping up from his seat. “I have not excused you. We have yet to hear from Renka.”

But the chancellor continued to the door without looking back. However, just as he neared the door, Renka shuffled into view.

The vice minister was dressed in a deep-red shenyi. Her wild, wavy hair was tied in a crude ponytail. She grinned as she bumped into Kojin.

“Is your hearing starting to go, Kojin? I believe His Majesty gave you an order,” she said. Kojin simply scowled in response and pushed past her.

Shohi’s hands were balled into fists and he was biting his lip. His anger was apparently barely contained.

“Your Majesty, you have called and I am here to answer,” Renka said before bowing, her voice unimaginably dignified in comparison to her sloppy appearance.



Shohi jumped and turned his gaze to the vice minister.

“I am Ryo Renka, Vice Minister of Works,” she continued.

Rimi’s eyes widened.

She’s so different from how she seemed back at her estate.

In the consort’s time in Ryo Renka’s care, the vice minister had seemed lazy and sluggish. But the woman who raised her head now looked shockingly calm and professional. Beneath her messy hair and attire, she was cold and sharp.

Rihan and Keiyu stared intently at the vice minister. For Shohi, however, this was his first time meeting her. He seemed surprised by the discrepancy between her sloppy appearance and her impeccably polite demeanor.

“This is our first time meeting, isn’t it?” Shohi said, staring at Renka unblinkingly. “Sit.”

Renka approached the table but stopped a few steps short.

“As a mere vice minister, I hesitate to sit at the same table as Your Majesty or the ministers,” she said.

Shohi seemed unsure whether to take that as a symbol of her respect or an act of defiance.

“Very well. There is fine,” he finally said, returning to his seat. “I brought you here from your estate because I have questions, Renka. Why was Setsu Rimi on your property? And why were Lord Ho and Kojin there? Answer truthfully.”

“I was visiting the old estate of Master Yo, my mentor. I happened to find her there. The poor thing was chained up, so I freed her, but she stubbornly refused to tell me her name. Since I didn’t know who she was, I decided to hold on to her,” Renka explained.

“And how do you explain both Kojin and Lord Ho being there?”

“As I am a candidate for Minister of Personnel, Lord Ho suggested he could stop by to pay his respects. I said yes. Similarly, Kojin announced he’d be visiting my estate to discuss the position. I told him he was welcome. It didn’t matter to me who came when. As a result, they bumped into each other.”

That's all technically true, but...

She left out her own scheming and knowledge of what was actually happening. It was a truthful, sincere answer, but also a cunning one.

"Setsu Rimi claims she was invited to your estate," Keiyu interjected with an amused look.

"And invited she was," Renka responded with a smirk and a sharp look. "I brought her into my home and told her she could stay."

"I see, I see. But alas, this doesn't seem to be working out, Your Majesty. You said before that we'd know the truth after we'd heard Chancellor Shu and Renka's stories. But both of them claim to have no connection to the kidnapping," Keiyu said. "Are they telling the truth? Is one of them lying? Could both of them be lying? We simply don't know. I think that, in the end, asking Setsu Rimi herself is our best option."

The Minister of Rites grinned at Rimi, but the light in his eyes was sharp and threatening. Rihan's gaze was also pinned on the consort, his look just as intimidating.

I can't tell them.

Rimi hung her head, crumbling beneath their silent glares.

"Isn't that girl the so-called threat to the empire?" Renka cut in, causing Rimi to look up in surprise.

"Watch your tongue!" Shohi ordered, his eyebrows raising in anger. "Rimi is to be my empress. She, more than anyone else, wishes for my reign to be peaceful and stable."

"Do you really believe that, Your Majesty?" Renka asked.

"Of course I do."

"Then why not take her word for it?"

"What?" the emperor said, furrowing his brow in confusion.

"If you believe that she has your reign and position in mind, then why not believe that her actions are for your own benefit?" the vice minister asked

calmly. “Why not simply trust that she is thinking of you when she chooses what to reveal and what to hide? What point is there in rashly squeezing the truth out of her?”

Rimi began to blink rapidly in surprise.

Is she protecting Chancellor Shu?

But no, it didn’t quite seem like she was trying to protect the chancellor. It was more like she was just offering advice.

“What’s that supposed to mean? How could hiding the identity of her kidnapper possibly help me...” the emperor mumbled to himself. A thought seemed to occur to him, judging by how his eyes suddenly widened.

“No... You’re joking! But then... No, still! I can’t let this stand!” Shohi roared, pounding his fist on the table. “I’m to allow Rimi’s kidnapper to wander free?! What if she ends up in danger again?!”

“If she’s aware of the danger and is fine with it, why not leave it at that?” Renka said. “If she believes it’s necessary to allow her kidnapper to wander free, and you’re aware that you and the entire empire stand to gain from it, then surely you can manage to swallow your anger?”

“No, but...!”

Shohi tried to argue, but all he could muster was a dumbfounded look. Renka showed no hesitation and turned her attention to Rimi.

“Setsu Rimi, tell us, did anything happen to you?”

The consort’s answer, the only one she could give, remained unchanged.

“I received an invitation to your estate. Before that...I was occupied. Forgive me for leaving the palace without saying anything, Your Majesty.”

Shohi hung his head in bewilderment.

“Leaving things unresolved is just going to cause trouble down the road,” Rihan pressed.

“If someone His Majesty trusts believes that is for the best, what trouble could come of it?” Renka responded.

“Your logic is based on the assumption that the people His Majesty trusts have the ability to judge what’s best for his reign,” Keiyu parried. His expression was uncharacteristically grave.

“His Majesty has chosen to trust them, so all we can do is trust in his judgment. It’s up to you ministers to decide how much you choose to interfere with his decisions,” Renka said.

Shohi had no response.

“It is not for me to decide how this ends. That duty falls to His Majesty and you ministers. So, I will leave it to you. I shall patiently await your decision,” Renka concluded. “May I return to my room, Your Majesty?”

“...Fine. Go,” the emperor grumbled.

Renka gave a curt bow and departed. Shohi watched her go before suddenly jumping to his feet.

“Rihan, Keiyu, you’re excused as well. Rimi, you’re coming with me,” he said.

The emperor grabbed the consort’s hand, pulled her to her feet, and dragged her out of the Hall of Law and Culture with long, quick strides.

“Your Majesty?! Where are we going?!” Rimi asked, flustered.

“I don’t know. Somewhere,” he responded, apparently annoyed by the question. His pace quickened.

At some point, Jotetsu appeared behind them, keeping his distance.

“I want to go riding,” Shohi suddenly barked, seemingly noticing the spy’s presence. “Jotetsu, come with us.”

The emperor was clearly upset. But more than angering him, it seemed that Renka’s words had left him shaken.



After Shohi had left, Keiyu and Rihan departed the Hall of Law and Culture. The two were silent for some time as they paced down the walkways.

“So Rimi’s kidnapper was Chancellor Shu,” Keiyu muttered.

“Considering the circumstances, I’m pretty confident you’re right. It’s no

surprise he'd want to get rid of her. I never thought he'd actually try to make it happen, but...it looks like he did," Rihan agreed. "I can't believe he'd do something so rash. But I'm sure he did it to help support His Majesty's reign. Thinking about it like that, maybe Renka has a point."

While Rihan's expression was contorted, Keiyu's was unperturbed as he raised his eyes to the sky. Peeking through the thin, early-autumn clouds, it was a pale blue.

"Anything for His Majesty's reign, is that it?" Keiyu asked.

"You disagree?"

Keiyu suddenly began to dig around in his pocket and eventually produced a letter, which he shoved in his fellow minister's face.

"When I received the letter saying that Rimi was with Renka, it wasn't the only one they left. I figured it would cause an uproar if anyone saw it, so I kept it hidden, but..."

Rihan took the letter, unfolded it, and began to read. Shock quickly set in.

"You're joking..."

III

Shohi's black horse was saddled and ready for them by the time they arrived at the stables. Jotetsu had also apparently prepared an escort as Kunki and a number of his subordinates were waiting to accompany them. The emperor was annoyed at having an escort, but he thought that Jotetsu had probably done what he could to keep it to a limited size out of consideration for him. Normally, the emperor would be guarded by dozens of men. They likely would've gone out and cleared the area beforehand too.

Rimi climbed onto the front of the horse. Shohi got on behind her, wrapping her in his arms and setting the horse off on a gallop. Rimi seemed frightened as they gathered speed, and she huddled down against the emperor's chest.

They left the palace and headed for the outskirts of the city. Long summer grass still flanked the northern road, but it was beginning to droop and grow

yellow. Another sign of summer's end. Purple bellflowers swayed amidst the weakening greenery.

I'm afraid Kojin was the one who kidnapped Rimi. Kojin... You won't get away with this.

Shohi clenched his jaw.

Up until that morning, the emperor had suspected that Shusei had somehow been involved. But as Renka had spoken, a realization had dawned on him. If Rimi was protecting her kidnapper, it was likely because revealing the truth would cause even bigger problems. If she was so dead set on her decision, then it was likely for the emperor's benefit. Therefore, the culprit must have been someone close to him who filled an important role. Someone who viewed Rimi as an obstacle and could coldly plot to eliminate her.

Nobody but Shu Kojin fit the description.

Jotetsu had seemed reluctant to pursue the truth, so he likely agreed with Rimi's decision to hide her kidnapper's identity as well.

If a rift emerged between Shohi and Kojin, the emperor would lose one of his top minds. They had likely hidden the chancellor's crimes to prevent that.

The moment that realization struck Shohi, he was not only filled with rage toward Kojin but also despair. A schism between the emperor and his chancellor would shake the entire court. The Ho loyalists would probably jump at the opportunity.

Surely you can manage to swallow your anger, Renka had said as the anger and despair threatened to consume him.

He hadn't been able to argue with that. In fact, he couldn't help but think that it was probably the best option. He couldn't forgive Kojin, but perhaps it was necessary to turn a blind eye.

However, if he were to pretend nothing had happened, it would also mean ignoring Rimi's suffering and the potential danger that may still await her. It meant sacrificing someone he cared about in order to keep the peace.

How could I think something so cruel?

The emperor was shocked at himself. For a moment, he'd considered prioritizing governing over someone he adored. It made him frustrated and uncontrollably angry.

But what angered him the most was the voice somewhere deep inside of him that said Renka's proposal was probably the right one. He had no choice but to accept that maybe he had a cruel side.

They entered a forest, ripping up the undergrowth as they passed. Glimpses of sunlight appeared in the cracks between the leaves. Jotetsu stayed close while the other guards circled the woods at a distance.

The prolonged gallop began to take a toll on the horse. Shohi seemed to notice the beast's breathing grow heavy as he brought it to a trot.

"Are you angry, Your Majesty? About me saying that Lady Renka invited me?" Rimi asked, looking intently back at the emperor.

"I'm not mad. I simply... Let me ask you something. What if I were to..." the emperor began before trailing off. After a moment's silence, he spoke again, but there was no confidence in his voice. "I know that it would make you sad if I favored politics over your well-being. But still, you..."

"Sad? Why would I be sad?" Rimi interrupted, blinking in confusion.

"Because I would be ignoring your suffering and putting you in danger for the sake of politics," he explained, realizing the consort wasn't understanding.

"Isn't that what you should be doing though? You are the emperor of Konkoku," Rimi replied with a confused look.

"It would be cruel."

"I'd say it's more rational than cruel. You're the leader of this country. It would be a natural decision, I'd think. I would never be sad over you doing the right thing."

"Rimi, you..."

Warmth filled Shohi's breast.

She always cares so much about me.

The consort didn't serve him out of a desire for luxury, comfort, or any sort of personal gain. When he looked at her curious, concerned expression, it was clear as day. He'd always known that on some level, but the worries and dread still plagued him.

She spoils me.

When she gave that foolish smile of hers and told him he was doing the right thing, it made him feel like he could act with confidence. He felt like a child who intentionally cries and shouts just to be reminded that he is loved.

The emperor brought the horse to a stop. A beam of sunlight shone through the trees, illuminating them.

"Is there nothing you want?" he asked.

If he planned to take action, knowing the harm it could put her in, he wanted to at least give her something.

"Your Majesty, you have given me a place in Konkoku. There's nothing else I want," Rimi answered simply.

"It can be anything. Clothes. Jewels. Hairpins. A palace even."

"I have plenty of clothes and hairpins, and I'm not really interested in jewels. And I think a palace would be too big. I hate to think about keeping it clean."

"Just tell me what you want. Anything."

"I don't know what I'm supposed to say, I don't—"

The consort suddenly sat up straight, as if something had just occurred to her. She pointed at the ground.

"That! I want that, Your Majesty."

She was pointing at a bellflower blooming at the foot of a tree.

"Could I have one of those flowers?"

"A flower of all things?! If it's flowers you want, I'll create a whole garden for you."

"No no, I want it now. Right this instant," Rimi said with a teasing smile.

Shohi was doubtful, but the consort was insistent, so he decided he had no choice. The emperor dismounted his horse. He picked the flower and returned to Rimi with it.

“This is really what you want?” Shohi asked, offering it to her.

The consort clasped the bellflower tightly with both hands and wore a blissful smile. As Rimi held it to her chest, the flower bright against her autumn-colored ruqun, she seemed as if she couldn’t be more satisfied.

Really? That’s all it took?

Seeing her joy filled Shohi’s heart with happiness as well.

“Thank you, Your Majesty. Truly.”



What a lavish gift.

Rimi had been given a flower handpicked by the emperor of a great nation that spanned half of the continent. For someone who lived to serve him, she felt incredibly fortunate to have him do something for her without the slightest hesitation. She even liked that he had no idea why it made her so happy.

It was a simple wildflower. Worthless in and of itself. What made it precious were Shohi’s feelings.

“You’re a strange one,” the emperor grumbled as he remounted the horse and set it off on a trot. “We’ve come this far. I suppose I’ll give you a ride back to the Palace of the Water Spirit.”

The emperor then turned back and called to Jotetsu, who was following at a distance from them.

“To the Palace of the Water Spirit!”

The soldiers who had been escorting them from a ways off went about securing their route. One of them broke off to return to the capital, perhaps to report on Shohi’s movements. The imperial palace needed to be aware of the emperor’s location.

Shohi picked a scenic path to the Palace of the Water Spirit, taking them through the woods and along a riverbank. Word appeared to have reached the

palace ahead of them as a stablehand was ready to take their horse the moment they were through the gates. A handmaid was also waiting. She led Rimi and the emperor to the gazebo alongside the Jade Spring.

The wind cut through the gazebo where tea and snacks had been laid out on a table. Shohi took a seat while the consort prepared some tea for him.

“I’ll stay here tonight,” Shohi suddenly announced as if a thought had just occurred to him. “I’d like to eat your cooking.”

Rimi’s hands, previously busy preparing the emperor’s tea, froze.

The consort knew her disappearance had left Shohi fraught with worry. Now that she had returned, she could hear the relief in his voice. After all the misery she’d caused, she wanted nothing more than to cook for him if it would make him happy.

But...

A memory bubbled to the surface of the consort’s mind. Kojin’s eyes right after eating the shiguo she’d served him at Renka’s. He had seemed utterly unmoved. Perhaps she’d caused a ripple of feeling, but that was it. Rimi had been so certain she’d served him the right thing, but perhaps she’d been wrong.

The thought shook her confidence. And now Shohi was here, relieved and eager for a moment of peace. Rimi wondered if she could truly offer what he wanted. It was just a casual request, but for the first time, she wasn’t certain what she should serve to make him happy.

Thinking about what he might like was so fun before, but now...

“What is it, Rimi?” the emperor asked, reaching out and touching her hand. “I’ve never seen you make that face when you’ve been asked to cook before. You usually look like a puppy about to go for a walk.”

“What? Oh, no, it’s nothing,” Rimi lied, trying to hide her panic behind a smile.

Shohi squeezed her hand.

“Tell me. What’s bothering you?”

“Nothing’s bothering me. I just... I did some cooking when I was at Renka’s

place. I served someone there and thought I'd given them what they needed," Rimi explained. "But it seemed like I was wrong. I served them the wrong thing. And now, thinking about what to serve you, I suppose I'm feeling a little lost."

"But you still want to cook," he responded with a chuckle.

"Huh?"

"You want to cook. You enjoy cooking. You see it as your mission, right? Then it doesn't matter if you're feeling lost. You just have to do it. I'll be happy with whatever you make," Shohi said with a smile. "As long as it tastes good, that is."

Rimi blinked, then blinked again.

Oh. He's right.

It had taken someone else saying it, but he was right. In spite of her worries and hesitation, she *did* still want to cook. Refusing hadn't even crossed the consort's mind. In the end, it didn't matter if she made a mistake or failed. All she could do was cook. It was simple, but it was everything.

"Make me something. Satisfy me," the emperor kindly ordered.

Rimi reflexively nodded.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The consort's worries hadn't vanished exactly, but she felt inspired to meet the emperor's command.

Rimi left for the kitchen, where she asked the cooks what sorts of ingredients they had available. The Palace of the Water Spirit's cooks were accustomed to Rimi's presence there, so they didn't hesitate to show her what was on hand. After reviewing the available offerings, she decided the venison looked like the tastiest option.

I remember seeing in Master Shusei's notes that venison is particularly good for exhaustion. The deer should have fattened up over the summer as well, so it should be nice and fatty.

The Palace of the Water Spirit had housed the ambassadors from Saisakoku during Qi, meaning the kitchen was still stocked with plenty of spices from their stay.

Rimi figured that the emperor was likely famished and tired after their ride, and she couldn't make him wait for too long. She decided she needed to make something simple and filling that would help relieve his exhaustion.

The consort tied up her sleeves, closed her eyes, and quietly cheered herself on before getting to work.

First was the venison. Rimi sliced the meat into thin strips, rubbed it down with spices, then seared it in a pan. The smell of meat and spices flooded the kitchen and poured out the door.

With the meat done, she finely chopped a selection of aromatics, mixed them with perilla oil, and added a touch of sugar and salt. She then selected some greens, washed them, and laid them out on a plate so they could serve as a bed for the venison. Finally, she laid the rich, spicy meat on the vibrant green bed and garnished it with the aromatics she'd prepared previously.

As the consort returned to the gazebo with the food and some wine, she saw Shohi's eyes light up.

"That smells incredible. What is it?" he asked.

"Venison with an aromatic garnish. It's a bit simple, but..."

Just as she'd guessed, Shohi was clearly starving. She'd no sooner prepared a dish for him than he had his chopsticks in hand. The moment he took a bite, a smile bloomed on his face.

"Not only does it smell amazing, but the taste isn't overpowering either," the emperor commented.

"You might enjoy using the greens as a wrap too," Rimi suggested.

Shohi took the consort's suggestion and wrapped the venison in some of the greens.

"Delicious," he mumbled as he bit into it. The sound startled Rimi for a moment.

"I do have a sense of taste. I simply never considered any food to taste good," the emperor had once said. He seemed overwhelmed by the frustration and loneliness then.

But now, he'd said it was delicious. It was small, but she had forced him to admit satisfaction. It gave the consort courage.

I still can't shake my doubts, but...

Shohi was there to remind her that she was still capable of something, even if it was small.

I'm so glad I have him.

With each bite, the emperor's mood seemed to improve and his expression brightened. That made Rimi feel like she could smile as well.

"You know exactly what I like," Shohi said after a gulp of wine. "I get hungry so quickly, so I always want something filling. People have always told me I don't eat much, but I just get sick of eating so quickly. Yet the way you use spices actually stirs my appetite, and the way you slice the meat makes it quite easy to eat."

"Well, if you spend time with someone and pay attention to them, you naturally pick up on what they prefer. In Wakoku, the Saigu I served was a relative of mine. I got to know her interests and needs very well, just as she learned mine."

"A relative, hm? My closest relative was my mother. But she didn't know anything about me. Not even how I ate. Once, she asked Shusei why I was so skinny. She sounded so annoyed. He patiently explained that I was picky, so I didn't eat much. It didn't take three days before she'd forgotten. And my father couldn't even remember how old I was."

It hurt Rimi to hear Shohi say such things so casually. He had never felt a parent's love growing up. But Shusei had always been by his side. The young scholar had probably been the only one who gave him the care he needed. It was likely why the emperor was unable to bring himself to hate his old friend, even now.

Rimi sat across from Shohi in the gazebo, just like old times, until the sun had long set. He relaxed while she poured drinks for him, and she even partook in a bit of wine herself.

It almost feels like I'm dreaming.

The relief of being back at Shohi's side flooded her every time she thought about the days she'd been imprisoned on Renka's estate.

But why do I feel like I'm forgetting something?

She turned her gaze to the starry sky and thought. But perhaps she hadn't quite shaken off the exhaustion because her mind offered little. She couldn't manage to remember what it was she'd forgotten.

Chapter 2: The Messenger

I

Dawn had yet to break on a new day when Rimi's eyes shot open. She had realized something, something that had been vaguely nagging at her since the day before. She sat up as it clicked into place.

"Aaaah! Tama!" the consort cried as she jumped out of bed.

Rimi had been so relaxed that it had completely slipped her mind that the dragon was still waiting in Shohi's room.

I've never done anything like this before!

She threw on her ruqun in a panic. As she tried to tie her sash, she managed to trip on the tangled mess and flail as she launched herself forward. The consort's mind spun as she continued trying to fix the sash.

Rimi had been enamored with the little dragon ever since she'd discovered the creature in the Palace of Small Wings's kitchen. She'd never dared to forget about Tama before. The dragon always stuck so closely to Rimi that the consort worried it might disappear somewhere if she were to leave it.

For some reason, I'm not worried about that now though. Since it's His Majesty's room, I feel like she'll still be waiting there for me.

Rimi could picture the little dragon curled up in the emperor's room, slightly sulking over being left behind all night.

Still, she needed to hurry over there and collect Tama. She informed Shohi that she'd be returning to the palace with him, put together a hurried breakfast, then boarded a carriage alongside the emperor. Meanwhile, a guard returned Shohi's horse to the palace.

Upon their return, Rimi rushed to the emperor's bedroom. Sure enough, Tama was curled up in the rafters.

“Tama! I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to leave you here all night!”

Rimi gathered the dragon in her arms, but Tama stayed stubbornly curled in a soft little white coil. The consort went pale thinking something might be wrong, but Tama gave her a brief glance with her big blue eyes.

I’m mad at you, the dragon’s eyes said. Tama promptly buried her head back in her fur.

Ah. She’s in a bad mood.

Tama was more upset than Rimi imagined.

“Tama! Tamaaa! I’m sorryyyyy!” the consort said, frantically petting her pure white fur.

“Is that the Quinary Dragon? It looks more like some kind of...crushed bun,” Shohi said with a surprised expression.

“How rude!” Tama seemed to say with an annoyed flick of her tail, not bothering to raise her face to look at him.

“She’s in a bad mood. I need to apologize to her. Here, Tama. I have some kaorizuke!”

Rimi pulled some paper-wrapped kaorizuke from her pocket, which she’d hastily wrapped before leaving the Palace of the Water Spirit. She laid the tightly-coiled dragon on the table and unwrapped the kaorizuke beside her.

Tama glanced up briefly.

“I’m sorry. Go on, eat up,” the consort pleaded, resting her chin on the table where the dragon could see.

The Quinary Dragon smoothly unfurled herself, approached the kaorizuke, and began to nibble. The sight made Shohi smile and begin to stroke the spot between her tiny horns with his fingertip.

“You have a soft spot for food too, don’t you? I’m not sure if you’re becoming more like Rimi or if your similarities were why you attached to her in the first place,” he said.

Tama spitefully ignored him and his petting.

A servant outside the room suddenly interrupted the gathering, announcing that Rihan and Keiyu had arrived. Shohi ordered they be let in, so Rimi picked up Tama and the kaorizuke, bringing them back to the bedroom. She sat on the bed and fed the dragon while the ministers were let into the living room.

“What has you two looking so serious?” Shohi asked, his voice carrying from the next room, even without Rimi trying to listen.

“We have news we felt you needed to know. Regarding Chancellor Shu,” Keiyu said in an uncharacteristically grave voice.

“You mean that Kojin is likely the kidnapper. Is that what you came to tell me?” the emperor spat with a scornful laugh.

Rimi quickly moved Tama to the bed, jumped up, and hurried into the next room.

“Your Majesty!” she said, clutching his sleeve. “I couldn’t help overhearing, but as I said, I was invited to—”

“Enough. I’ve already figured it out,” Shohi interrupted with a somewhat pained expression. “But as Renka advised, I’m considering simply swallowing my anger.”

He would do that?

Relief started to bloom within the consort.

Thank goodness. Maybe we can get through this without His Majesty losing Chancellor Shu then.

She and the emperor exchanged a silent look, seemingly understanding each other. However, Rihan’s gravelly voice cut the moment short.

“You may want to be aware of something before you make your decision. If the chancellor’s actions were honestly meant to support you, then moving past it would be the wise choice,” the minister said. “But there are things that need to be made clear if we don’t want problems down the road.”

“What needs to be made clear?” Shohi asked, frowning.

Keiyu stepped forward and offered a letter to the emperor.

“The truth is, I received this at the same time I received the letter notifying me that Rimi was with Renka,” he explained.

Shohi gazed at the letter. Rimi, who was standing next to him, peeked at it as well. She gasped as she read the contents.

“Is that a letter from Chancellor Shu to a general of the imperial army?” she asked.

Contact me at once. I want to know how the plan is progressing.

The contents of the message weren’t exactly notable. The issue was who had sent it and who it was for. It was signed by Kojin and addressed to a general who was effectively a representative of the Ho loyalists. Why would the chancellor be sending a letter like that to, essentially, an enemy agent?

Shohi’s eyes widened.

“What is the meaning of this?” he demanded.

“There are two possibilities. Either this general has shifted loyalties or Chancellor Shu has.”

Rimi shivered at Keiyu’s explanation.

I doubt we’d be lucky enough for a general to just defect like that. But I can’t see the chancellor betraying His Majesty either.

“Kojin? A betrayer?” the emperor asked, the blood draining from his face.

“We can’t be certain of that,” Rihan cut in, seemingly hoping to appease Shohi. “And I don’t agree with Keiyu that there are only two options. It could be part of a plot by the chancellor to disrupt the Ho House and—”

“Where is Jotetsu?!” Shohi shouted, clutching the letter in his fist.

“Here, Your Majesty,” the spy said, appearing from the doorway to kneel.

“Bring me Kojin! At once!”

The rage was clear on the emperor’s face. Jotetsu silently nodded and departed for the Hall of Law and Culture.

“Your Majesty, please. This may be part of a strategy, not a betrayal,” Rihan insisted, apparently hoping to keep the emperor in check. But Shohi responded

with a fierce glare.

“A strategy I was not informed of! A strategy I was not consulted on and did not approve of! So what then, Kojin is simply making decisions on his own now?! And what if it really is a betrayal? What then?!” he roared.

Shohi was on the verge of forgiving Kojin’s actions, something that clearly took all his willpower. But this new source of suspicion was proving to be too much.

This isn’t good.

“How about some tea?” Rimi asked, concerned about the direction things were going in.

“No,” Shohi responded curtly. He began to silently pace the room while the ministers stood by and watched.

Kojin appeared shortly after, escorted by Jotetsu. The chancellor gave his usual calm, dignified bow before entering.

“How may I serve, Your Majesty? May I remind you that your *humble servant* might like to return home at some point? Is there still some matter that *displeases* you?” Kojin said, his annoyance at being detained dripping from every word.

It did nothing to improve the emperor’s mood.

“Just when I was planning to turn a blind eye to your actions... What is this?! Explain yourself!” Shohi said, hurling the letter at Kojin’s feet in anger.

The chancellor calmly picked up the letter, looked over it, and then snorted derisively.

“This was a trap I set for the Ho House. A bit of strategy. I don’t know if it’s borne any fruit yet, but—”

“Strategy? What sort of strategy?” Shohi demanded.

“Sowing discord, Your Majesty.”

Sowing discord?

Jotetsu seemed to pick up on Rimi’s confusion and slipped over beside her.

“Making the enemy believe there are betrayers among them. It’s a strategy to make the enemy suspicious of their own people. It’s a cunning little ploy that plays the enemy’s suspicion to our advantage,” the spy explained.

“But wouldn’t they see right through that? The person could just deny it,” Rimi whispered back.

“Yep, a shrewd observer would probably figure it out immediately. The real value in the strategy comes after. When someone gets emotional or misunderstandings pop up, they start wondering things to themselves. ‘Was that really the enemy trying to sow discord? Or were they actually a betrayer the whole time and I never saw it?’”

It was like a slow-acting poison.

Shohi’s nostrils flared in anger.

“And you didn’t think to inform Rihan? Keiyu? ME? Why was I not consulted? Not even that, why was I not *told* about it?! Do you think yourself above all of us? Or maybe this isn’t a strategy at all. Tell me, where’s your proof that this isn’t an act of betrayal?”

“Proof?” Kojin repeated indignantly. “You mean to say you doubt me? That there is no fundamental trust between us? You insult me, Your Majesty.”

“How can I *not* doubt you? You kidnap Rimi and pretend to know nothing about it! And when I order you to tell the truth, you deceive me! How can I trust a person like that?!”

The truth had been laid bare for all to see. Though the emperor had intended to ignore the act, the words came from his lips like an accusation.

Kojin’s eyes narrowed into a glare.

“I have always worked to protect your reign. Everything I have done, I have done to serve you. Do you doubt that of me?” the chancellor asked.

“Of course I do!”

No!

Rimi was in a panic. She could sense an anger boiling in Kojin like nothing she’d seen before. The cracks between him and Shohi were ready to split into a

chasm.

“Your Majesty, please, calm down!” the consort pleaded, clutching at his sleeve.

“It is perfectly likely that this is indeed just a strategic move. It was my first guess, personally. If there’s anyone in the world I can’t see joining the Ho family’s side, it’s Chancellor Shu,” Rihan interrupted, trying to mediate. “The reason I brought this to your attention now is that I worried it might cause doubts down the road.”

“Then show me the proof!” Shohi repeated.

“It’s impossible to prove. One can prove that something exists, but how do they prove that something doesn’t? A betrayal can be proven, but how does one prove the lack of betrayal?” Keiyu said defeatedly.

“Shut up, Keiyu!” Rihan snapped.

“Calm down, all of you. Am I completely surrounded by fools?” Kojin asked, his voice resounding with cold anger.

Rihan and Keiyu’s mouths snapped shut. Rimi panicked while Shohi fumed. Jotetsu gloomily watched the proceedings. Kojin’s gaze passed slowly across all of them.

“It’s all clear now, Your Majesty. You don’t trust me,” Kojin said. “And what greater joke is there than a chancellor who isn’t even trusted by his liege? I suppose it’s time to resign as your chancellor. Effective immediately.”

“No. Confess what you’re hiding first, *then* I’ll allow you to resign,” Shohi ordered.

“Feel free to try and stop me. I am returning home. Don’t expect me to ever set foot in this palace again,” Kojin said with a mocking laugh before turning his back on the emperor.

“I’m not done with you, Kojin!” the emperor shouted.

But his words didn’t stop the chancellor. Shohi, in his fury, reached for one of the swords decorating the walls, drew it, and pointed it at Kojin’s back.

“Your Majesty!” Rimi cried, clapping her hands over her mouth.

Jotetsu went chasing after Shohi, desperate to stop him.

The emperor thrust his sword forward to run Kojin through. But he stopped just short. The tip of the blade came to rest against the chancellor's back.

Kojin seemed to notice, as he stopped in place.

"If you wish to cut me down," he said calmly, not turning around, "then cut me down."

Shohi ground his teeth in anger, but the sword remained motionless. Kojin waited for a while, but once it was clear that Shohi was not going to move, he slowly walked away.

The emperor was frozen in place with his sword extended. As Kojin disappeared out the door, he hurled the decorative sword to the ground with all the strength he had.

"KOJIN!"

II

Shusei was having a late, solitary lunch. The room was expansive and contained a long black lacquered table. Twelve seats were arranged around the piece of furniture, but Shusei sat alone. His meal consisted of nothing but porridge and a sweet fried treat. He was almost completely silent as he ate one spoonful after another.

It had been two days since Rimi's return to the palace. Kojin's interrogation would likely have already begun. The scholar wondered how much of the truth had come to light. If the chancellor's actions were revealed and he lost his position, it would be an unbelievable boon for the Ho House.

But seeing Kojin lose his position because of some bungle was not enough for Shusei.

I want him to taste the humiliation as I rip his position from him with my own hands.

A memory surfaced in the scholar's mind. He had been a boy, hungry for his father's love. He could still remember the heartless words Kojin had spat at him.

“Don’t get so full of yourself. You are nothing but a living, thinking tool.”

Shusei hadn’t cried then. He had simply been stunned. There had been nothing but the hollow realization that his father didn’t see him as human.

Ho Shusei wanted to make sure that Kojin tasted that hollowness at least once in his life.

Is this what a hunger for revenge feels like?

A quiet soul by nature, Shusei calmly observed the negative emotions that whirled within him.

And eating has become such a chore.

These simple meals of porridge and fried snacks were a new tradition for him. Since becoming master of the Ho House, the act of eating had lost its luster. The more lavish the food, the blander it seemed to taste. Now, he only ate simple meals.

Even the act of lifting the food to his mouth felt like an act of obligation.

I used to be a cuisinologist. Now look at me.

“Because I want you back,” Rimi’s voice echoed in his mind.

If only. If only he could go back to his life before all the politics and pushing her away. To go back to when he wanted to live his life as a cuisinologist. He could collect his works and introduce them to the world. Foster the new minds until they could begin to—

As he realized the delusional fantasy playing out in his mind, he laid his spoon down.

“It’s useless,” Shusei said in an almost inaudible whisper.

“You seem bored, Lord Ho. Perhaps I should cheer you up with some interesting news?”

Shusei jumped in surprise and looked back. A man was standing behind him in a theatrical outfit composed of a pure-white mask and a matching shenyi: Mars.

“You’re always sneaking up on me, Mars. What is it today? What’s this interesting news?” Shusei asked.

The masked schemer approached and took the seat next to Shusei, uninvited. He rested his arm on the table, placed his chin in his hand, and leaned over as if peeking at the scholar.

“They say that Shu Kojin left the Hall of Law and Culture this morning and is headed home,” Mars whispered. “But it turns out that ‘home’ in this case means the Shu House’s second home in Koto, out in Tei Prefecture. He’s disregarding His Majesty’s orders. With the way things are going, I doubt that the chancellor will be chancellor much longer.”

The way things are going?

“That would be fortunate for the Ho House if it’s true. But why haven’t we heard anything from the Minister of Justice or the generals? They would normally be rushing to deliver news like this to us,” Shusei said with a frown.

“I imagine that they don’t know yet. My guess is that His Majesty and his associates are doing everything they can to keep news of this little rift secret. I don’t blame them,” Mars mused.

“The bonds between His Majesty and his associates are strong. His servants are clever as well. If they’re trying to hide something, how did you manage to learn of it, Mars? Even if the news were to leak, that would take time. Yet it happened just this morning and we know of it by noon? And I’m supposed to trust this news?”

An amused glint shone through the slim eye cutouts in Mars’s mask.

“You know what they say. It takes a snake to know a snake. Just trust me.”

If the news was true, it was a powerful opportunity for Shusei in a number of ways. He thought silently for a moment.

“Very well. I’ll look into this too,” Shusei said, standing up. “I know about the Shu House’s home in Koto. I have my ways of getting information from the Autumn Garden.”

The scholar looked down at Mars’s masked face.

He’s someone close to His Majesty. I’m certain of it.

It was tempting to try and rip off the man’s mask right here. But Mars was

constantly wary, watching people's movements and behavior. He'd probably dodge and slip from the room before anything could come of it.

Better to play it safe. For now.



With Kojin's departure, Shohi ordered Rihan, Keiyu, and even Jotetsu out of his chambers. The emperor stomped into his bedroom. In his fury, he knocked over a vase from a table and hurled the ornaments from the top of his dresser onto the floor.

Tama seemed shocked by his uproar and scurried up to the rafters. Rimi had no choice but to watch the destruction taking place as she clung tearfully to the doorframe.

After sending a chair hurtling with a kick, the emperor went to the walls and began ripping down embroideries, throwing them to the ground. A necklace laying on a table was his next victim, which he grabbed and ripped apart with all his strength. The beads went flying and scattered across the floor. He then seized a water pitcher, raised it above his head, and smashed it onto the ground.

When Shohi had exhausted everything he could find to smash and throw, he hurled himself face-first onto his bed and angrily clenched the covers.

When Rimi recalled the emperor's old cruelty and violence, she felt slightly frightened. But as she watched him now, buried in the covers with trembling fists, she felt her fear steadily fade away.

He's so hurt.

Whenever Shohi wanted to cry out in despair, he flew into a rampage instead. As an emperor, he probably thought that violence was more becoming of his position than tears.

Rimi crossed the destroyed room and knelt beside Shohi to gently stroke his head.

"I just couldn't take it anymore," he murmured, face still concealed by the covers. "I couldn't forgive Kojin for what he'd done to you. I wanted to drive him out of the capital right then and there. But I knew that I needed him, so I

thought I could hold back my anger. Yet that letter...”

“Do you doubt Chancellor Shu?” Rimi asked.

“Of course not. I know it was probably all part of a strategy. But he’s going around starting plots without even informing me of them,” Shohi explained.

The chancellor recognized Shohi as emperor and worked for the good of his reign. But judging by the way he acted, he clearly seemed to look down on the emperor. His actions toward Rimi told the same story, but Shohi had tried to turn a blind eye to that. He’d been working so hard to hold his tongue. But the letter, and the disrespect it implied, was like a dagger in his heart. It was surely more than he’d been able to bear.

But the first words from his mouth were *“I just couldn’t take it anymore.”* The words were full of regret, the regret that he should’ve endured, no matter how much disrespect he’d been faced with.

I want to help him. I have to find some way to mend his relationship with the chancellor.

Shohi was still a young man. He was flexible and capable of dealing with things rationally. He would likely be able to handle these issues if he tackled them one by one rather than getting them dumped on him like he had this time. Even forgiving Kojin would’ve been simple enough.

The problem was on Kojin’s side. When Rimi had faced him at Renka’s estate, not even the power of memory could move him. If he was set on his anger toward Shohi, it would be hard to calm that anger.

Rimi felt so sorry for everything. After all, it was her existence that had brought this on.

What do I do?

The consort continued to silently stroke Shohi’s head, but suddenly, her hand stopped. A realization was slowly dawning on her.

“Your Majesty, do you want to keep Chancellor Shu by your side?” she asked.

“What does it matter? He’s gone. His pride will never allow him to return,” Shohi responded, the regret clear even in his muffled voice.

“My goodness, what happened here?” came a soft voice.

It was Sai Hakurei, who was standing in the bedroom doorway. The enchantingly beautiful director of the rear palace seemed shocked as he gazed around the room.

Shohi straightened up, smoothed his clothes, and stood.

“Nothing,” the emperor said.

“You call this nothing? You have the Quinary Dragon cowering in the rafters. It looks like somebody let a wild monkey loose in here,” Hakurei quipped.

“Mind your own business. What do you need, Hakurei?” Shohi snapped, still stewing in anger.

“I was asked to come here,” the eunuch explained. “I heard you drove everyone out. The ministers, even Jotetsu. The Minister of Revenue thought that I might be able to do some good, and—”

“So Rihan sent you, did he?”

“He wanted me to ask that you release Ryo Renka as soon as possible.”

Shohi’s mouth hung open.

“Renka! I completely forgot about her,” the emperor said.

“She is on the verge of becoming Minister of Personnel. You should be treating someone like that with a gentle touch. Your Minister of Revenue believes she should be released at once if she’s done nothing wrong,” Hakurei explained. “In fact, if you still intend to offer her the position, now might be a good opportunity to see if she’s willing.”

“You’re right,” Shohi sighed, nodding along to Hakurei’s suggestion.

Hakurei’s golden-brown eyes were kind as he watched the emperor. He seemed happy that Shohi was willing to comply so readily. The brothers’ circumstances had forced them into a tortured relationship, but now, seeing the younger brother reply so easily to the older brother’s gentle prodding, Rimi thought that they had finally found peace.

“I will go to the Hall of Law and Culture to see Renka,” Shohi announced as he

stood up from the bed and straightened his clothes. “Tell Keiyu and Rihan that she is to be released after meeting with me.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Hakurei said, bowing as the emperor passed by him to leave.

“Wait, Your Majesty!” Rimi said as she chased after Shohi. “Let me go with you. I want to thank Lady Renka properly.”

It was technically the truth, but the consort had another reason for escorting him too. She was worried that the emperor was still worked up, and Renka had a sharp edge to her. She was afraid the vice minister might inflame Shohi’s anger again.

Despite her worries, Rimi was ultimately glad that Renka was cleared of suspicion and would soon go free. The consort still didn’t have any idea what Renka had been thinking, but in the end, she owed the vice minister for her freedom.

Shohi skipped the formality of announcing his arrival and headed for the room where Renka was being held. The scent of tobacco grew thick in the air as they neared. Imprisonment had apparently not been enough to prevent her from smoking.

“Pardon the intrusion, Ryo Renka,” Shohi said as he opened the door.

From behind the emperor, Rimi could see Renka at the far end of the room, lounging unceremoniously on top of a bed with a pipe in hand. She hadn’t changed her clothes since appearing before Shohi and the ministers the day before, yet her manner was entirely different. There was no trace of her previous dignified and courteous behavior. She seemed more like a brothel goer indulging in luxury.

The emperor’s sudden appearance seemed to take Renka by surprise as she fixed him with a wide-eyed stare.

“Your Majesty? I can’t believe it...” she murmured.

“I have come to apologize for unjustly holding you here. May we talk?” Shohi asked.

As the reality of the situation set in for Renka, she covered her mouth with one hand. A muffled groan escaped her, but there was a certain amusement in the sound she made. It was almost a chuckle. Rimi could see a smile in the vice minister's eyes.

Shohi and Rimi exchanged a look, both of them realizing that Renka was holding back laughter.

Eventually, the vice minister seemed to reach her limit, her hand coming away from her mouth, and she doubled over in raucous laughter.

"What's so funny?" Shohi asked, which just resulted in more laughter.

"No no, I'm so sorry, Your Majesty. I'm being terribly rude," Renka said, wiping tears from her eyes as she stood up. The laughter in her voice was barely subdued. She placed her pipe alongside a tobacco box on the bed and approached a table.

"Please, have a seat," she invited. "I know it's a bit of a mess, but..."

"A bit, she says..." Shohi grumbled.

The emperor's displeasure was hardly a surprise. Renka had barely been in the Hall of Law and Culture for two days, yet her room was already in complete disarray. The table was strewn with books and cups, and for some reason, pillows and blankets had been laid on the floor. She must have been demanding the guards gather all sorts of things for her during her short stay here.

Rimi stood off to the side as Shohi took a seat. Renka offered a respectful bow before approaching the table.

"I am honored that you found the time to come here. Had you simply summoned me, I would have come to you," the vice minister said.

"I wanted to apologize. I could hardly demand you come and see me," Shohi responded.

Renka stifled another snicker.

What are you doing, Lady Renka?!

Rimi went pale at seeing the vice minister laugh at everything the emperor said. Shohi seemed irritated by the laughing fits as well.

“What exactly is so funny, Renka?” he asked angrily.

“Nothing, nothing. I’m just witnessing something unbelievably strange play out before my eyes, and I simply can’t help myself.”

“What’s strange?”

“An emperor apologizing to a mere vice minister,” Renka explained.

“I’ve held you here without due cause, so I came to apologize for it. What’s so strange about that?”

“Your Majesty, the fact you would even say that is strange. An emperor doesn’t apologize to his retainer.”

“You’re wrong. I’d suggest you change your view,” Shohi said with a frown. “Anyway, stop laughing. I came here to apologize, but you’re starting to irritate me. Now sit. I won’t have you standing off at a distance like yesterday. It ruins the mood.”

“As you wish, Your Majesty,” Renka said before taking a seat across from Shohi.

“As I said before, I wish to apologize for holding you here unjustly. I also want to offer my thanks for helping Rimi.”

This was likely why Shohi had come unannounced and without an escort. It would harm his dignity as emperor if anyone saw him apologizing to a vassal like this.

“In other words, I’ve been cleared of suspicion? You have some idea of who the culprit is, then?”

“I do. Thus why I am here to apologize,” Shohi said. There was an undercurrent of resentment in his voice.

“Good to hear,” Renka responded casually. It was unclear whether she noticed the emperor’s gloom. “But of course, it’s no surprise that you’d suspect me. It’s also only natural I’d help the girl. And I must say, you’ve provided some excellent tobacco during my little stay here. I couldn’t be more satisfied.”

“Lady Renka, forgive me for burdening you with all this,” Rimi said, bowing. “But thanks to you, I escaped a terrible fate. You have my thanks as well.”

“No thanks necessary. I just stumbled across you. Besides, you treated me to a delicious breakfast. But I suppose it’s about time I returned home.”

“You are free to go. But before that, I’d like to know one thing,” Shohi said. He looked Renka straight in the eyes before continuing. “As it stands, you are a candidate for Minister of Personnel. And after the advice you gave me yesterday, I believe you would be well-suited to ministership. Do you intend to serve me as a minister?”

“Do you want my honest answer? Or do you want me to answer as a servant responding to their liege?” Renka asked with a coy smile.

“Answer honestly. I hate it when the truth is hidden by subservience.”

“Well then,” Renka began, straightening her posture, “I am prepared to become Minister of Personnel. Doing so will make it possible for me to achieve my desires. But you asked if I intend to serve you as minister. And the answer to that...is no.”

III

No?!

Renka was effectively saying she would not follow the emperor’s orders. It was shocking to hear her say it so blatantly. Was she trying to enrage him?

But Shohi simply gave her a puzzled look. He sat in silence for a while, seemingly thinking, as Renka continued to give that coy smile.

“You say you will not serve me, but you will become a minister if it means accomplishing your own desires. Is that what you’re getting at?” he finally asked. “What are these desires?”

“The continued peace and prosperity for our land,” Renka declared. “You asked for my honest answer, so I gave it. We need people who will work for our country. I recognize that the throne serves as one of the pillars of the empire, and in that regard, I respect your position. But in the end, I serve the empire. I have no interest in serving you personally.”

Renka was being unfathomably rude. Rimi felt herself go pale, fearing the

worst. She couldn't resist turning to look at Shohi to see how he might react.

The emperor looked serious, but there wasn't a trace of anger in his expression.

Your Majesty? You aren't mad?

"If that is what you desire, then I have no problem with it," he said calmly. "Ryo Renka, you are to assume the position of Minister of Personnel and carry out your duties."

"Oh? You're fine with that?" Renka said with a teasing smile.

Shohi nodded.

"We want the same thing. I don't want vassals who look no further than my interests. I can't have servants who terrorize the people and throw the land into chaos simply because it benefits me."

The emperor's response wiped the smile from Renka's face. Her expression turned solemn, and a keen light shone in her eyes. She slowly stood up.

"But is this a choice you can arbitrarily make?" she asked.

"There's nothing arbitrary about it. You have been recommended by Kojin, Rihan, and Keiyu."

"But would they tolerate the audacity of saying I don't intend to serve you? Shouldn't you consult with your chancellor at the least? You don't think he would find my thinking unacceptable?"

"Kojin...has left."

Renka's eyes widened at the admission.

"He announced that he was resigning his post and leaving the capital. I told him I didn't accept his resignation, but..." Shohi said with a pained look.

"This land needs the chancellor," Renka said resolutely.

"And yet he is gone."

"I cannot accept the position without the chancellor's approval."

"Despite the fact that I said I approve?"

“I will not be minister to an emperor who doesn’t seek the insight of one of his greatest minds, whether you ordered me to or not. Please, seek out his counsel once more.”

“Do you think it would be that easy to get him back? You’ve known him a long time. You should know well how he is.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Renka said with a smirk. “Which means I hope you’ll allow me to return to my estate as Vice Minister of Works. I’ll just continue carrying out my duties there.”

Renka turned and went to the bed, collected the packet of tobacco from her tobacco box, and slipped it into her pocket. She then turned back to Shohi and Rimi and offered a bow.

“I’ll be on my way,” she said.

“Lady Renka, wait!” Rimi blurted out, trying to stop the vice minister from leaving.

“Was there something else?” Renka asked, cocking her head slightly.

“Do you really think Chancellor Shu won’t come back?” the consort asked.

“I don’t recall saying that. I simply agreed that it wouldn’t be easy.”

“So you *do* think he might come back? Do you have any idea how we could get him to return?” Rimi pressed.

The vice minister seemed torn on whether to respond. However, it seemed her pity for Rimi’s desperation won out.

“Ever since he was young, one thing has been dear to Kojin: this country. He fears chaos, and that hasn’t changed. Whatever his problems with the emperor, if he can be made to recognize that His Majesty can bring peace to the empire, he’ll set aside his wounded pride and bend the knee. He’s smart enough to do that,” she remarked.

“So how do we do that?!” Rimi asked tearfully, but Renka simply shrugged.

“Now that, I don’t know.”

Shohi gave a challenging stare to the vice minister, as if he were looking at

Kojin himself.

“What if I offered to expand his authority as chancellor?” he suggested.

“Kojin doesn’t need expanded jurisdiction to manipulate what he wants from the shadows. In fact, doing that would mean bringing his work into the light and chaining it down with official processes. Besides, is that a decision you should be making arbitrarily, Your Majesty? What would your ministers think? And how would the Ho loyalists use it against you?”

“What if I offered to expand his lands, then?” Shohi asked, undeterred.

“That would be the most foolish thing you could do,” Renka said curtly. “Kojin would likely believe that you see him as someone motivated by selfish desire. My bet is that he would just dig in his heels.”

“Then we should expand his available manpower so he can carry out his goals more effectively,” Shohi said.

“You should save that talk for after you’ve convinced him to serve under you once more. Trivialities like that aren’t going to catch his ear.”

“Well then, what? What do we do?” Shohi snapped, anger beginning to build in his voice.

“I already told you. Make him believe that you have what it takes to bring peace to this land,” Renka repeated impassively.

“But he left because he’s fed up with me! You’re saying he won’t return for as long as I’m emperor!” Shohi shouted, fists balling in anger.

Renka’s expression was unchanged.

“It’s a hard thing, changing people’s minds. Pile your gold and silver, make your threats, wield your authority all you like, but you can’t easily sway a person’s heart. You might get them to change their behavior, but it’ll all be for show. You won’t change them deep down.”

And with that, Renka strode out the door.

She’s gone...

As Rimi watched the vice minister leave, she felt as if she’d been abandoned.

Shohi seemed to feel it even more keenly than she did. Everything seemed to be slipping through his fingers.

The emperor chewed his lip and stared at his hands in silence for a while. He seemed lost, like he was out of ideas.

He and Renka both see that Konkoku needs Chancellor Shu.

If the chancellor were there, had heard their conversation, and approved, Shohi could've made Renka Minister of Personnel on the spot. But with him gone, things had hit a snag. And who could say how the Ho House would seize on the opportunity when they learned a rift had developed between the emperor and his chancellor?

With Kojin gone, Shohi was being backed into a corner.

Rimi felt some responsibility for how everything was unfolding too. In a way, it was her presence that had triggered Kojin's leaving. It made her think hard about what she could do to fix things.

I wish there was something I could do to help.

Suddenly, Rimi felt disgusted by her line of thinking.

"I wish"? Am I going to stand around wishing? No. It doesn't matter if there's nothing I can do to help, I still have to try.

Shusei's words from the days before echoed in her mind.

"So think."

Rimi stood utterly motionless as she thought. And then, what floated to the surface of her mind was a smiling face: Shohi's. The very same defeated-looking man currently before her.

"Delicious," he had said with a smile. When they had first met, it was something she never could've expected. The Shohi now and the Shohi she'd once known had entirely different mindsets.

"It's a hard thing, changing people's minds," Renka had said. But Shohi was living proof it could happen.

Rimi could've given the emperor all the gold and silver in Wakoku, but she

wouldn't have gotten anything more than a half-hearted word of thanks. His heart wouldn't have changed.

Instead, she had cooked for him. Through eating her food, he had realized something. That was what had changed something within him.

A government was ultimately made up of people. Kojin was not a tool or function of government. He was a person. And while Rimi may know little about governing, she felt like she was still able to do something where people were concerned.

When Shohi had said her food was delicious at the Palace of the Water Spirit's gazebo, it had given her courage. She resolved to hold on to that feeling now.

"Your Majesty," Rimi said, lifting her head. "If you want to keep Chancellor Shu at your side...then I will go. I'll persuade him."

Shohi turned back to the consort with a surprised look.

"You? What are you talking about? That's ridiculous. He wouldn't hear a word you have to say," he said.

"I know. But I don't believe that pressure or profit will work on him. Like Lady Renka said, it's hard to change someone's mind. But I believe he's still a person. And if it's on a personal level, I feel like even someone like me, who knows nothing of politics, can do something. I think it's worth the risk. If you want to bring him back, then I want to give it a try. I want to see if I can make him understand your feelings."

Rimi looked Shohi in the eyes.

"Please, send me to him," she asked.

"The man kidnapped you, and now you want to wander into his home? How foolish can you be?"

"Well...maybe I am a fool. I wouldn't call myself clever," Rimi said with a shrug. "But I don't think Chancellor Shu will see any point in killing me now. If his goal in erasing me was to help you, then there wouldn't be any point in doing that now since he's left your side."

"And that's enough for you? Aren't you frightened? I always thought you

were absentminded, but I didn't think you were so badly gone that you'd have forgotten what happened just two days ago."

"No, of course I'm scared."

"Then don't go!"

"I'm scared, but..." Rimi trailed off, then smiled brightly. "But my fear doesn't matter. If you tell me to go, then I'll be able to go, fear or not."

"Rimi..." Shohi uttered. "No. I don't like it. Let me have Rihan or Keiyu come up with some sort of plan first."

"When I was listening to Lady Renka speak, I realized that Chancellor Shu wouldn't change his mind no matter how much pressure or bribery you used. He won't even lend an ear. But even he has to eat. If I feed him something good and ask him how it was, I think he'll at least tell me if he liked it or not. And I think that would be enough to start a conversation. It could be a casual way of getting him to talk about his feelings."

Shohi grumbled. He likely knew as well as Rimi did that Kojin was too far gone to hear any suggestions the emperor might have. Anything he did officially as emperor to try to change the chancellor's mind would just lead to a deadlock. Just opening a conversation with him would probably be worth it.

Rimi suddenly took a step closer to Shohi.

"Your Majesty, please, send me. Let me be your messenger," she asked, looking into the emperor's troubled eyes with a calming gaze. She admired his long eyelashes while she stared into eyes for a long time, hoping to ease his worries.

Shohi seemed terribly lost. She knew that deep down, if there was even the slightest chance of success, he would want to send her on this mission. But he surely felt worried and guilty for saddling her with such a duty.

"I can't," Shohi said, placing a hand on Rimi's cheek.

"I won't hear it. I'm going," the consort said, placing her hand on his. "You know I have to. I don't know if I'll actually be of any use, but if there's even a shred of hope, then I have to go. Please, give me your command."



Tears welled in the emperor's eyes.

You're so beautiful, Your Majesty.

It wasn't just his physical appearance. The worry and doubt in his eyes made them seem especially lovely. Because behind those feelings, there was something unyielding and wise.

"I don't want you to go. The idea of sending you to Kojin fills me with worry...but as Renka said, Kojin would refuse anything I tried," Shohi admitted. Frustration began to tinge his expression. "And I can't afford to lose my chancellor. So..."

The emperor suddenly stopped and fell silent for a moment.

"So will you go on my behalf, Rimi?" he finally asked.

Rimi reverently squeezed Shohi's hand against her cheek, then kneeled.

"Yes. I will go, Your Majesty. For you," she said without hesitation.

Chapter 3: To the Autumn Garden

I

Determination had crystallized inside Rimi. If Shohi couldn't bring himself to lose Kojin, then Rimi would do anything to help, no matter how small. Besides, ever since she'd left Renka's estate, the consort had felt she needed to face Kojin again at some point.

I have to do this. For Master Shusei's sake as well.

Rimi believed if she could alleviate some of the emptiness that Shusei felt, he might return to his old self. She felt that Shohi needed him even more than she did.

The consort had intended to go to Kojin's estate, but Jotetsu informed her that he wasn't there. Apparently, the former chancellor decided to return to the Shu House's second home in his birthplace of Koto in Tei Prefecture. Since Mrs. Yo had left for Koto a few hours after him, the Shu estate was empty. Shohi had been informed of the same thing.

Meeting with Kojin meant a trip to Tei was necessary. The emperor had at first been reluctant to send Rimi so far away, but the empress-to-be had reassured him with a smile. He relented in the end, agreeing to let her go on the condition that Jotetsu accompanied her.

But first, she would need to prepare. Rimi went to the Palace of the Water Spirit to collect clothes and other necessities. She packed her kaorizuke pot as well.

She then returned to the imperial palace. Immediately, she was stopped by Hakurei, who told her that the four consorts were worried to hear she was leaving so soon after finally making it back home.

The journey to Tei took two days by carriage. She needed to leave the capital as soon as possible if she wanted to catch up to Kojin. She couldn't afford to

take her time, so she asked Hakurei to bring the four consorts to the cuisinology hall. Books were located there that she believed would come in handy, so she wanted to collect them before leaving anyway.

Upon separating from Hakurei, the consort headed directly to the cuisinology hall.

With no one other than Rimi frequenting the building these days, a thin layer of dust had begun to gather on the desks. As she swung open the doors, light and fresh air poured into the room and sent the potent scent of ink swirling.

The consort stood there for a while, looking at the books that packed the shelves.

This was Master Shusei's place. There are traces of him everywhere.

The memories had always threatened to suffocate her. Any time she had reason to come here now, she would try her best to get out as quickly as possible.

But at Renka's estate, Rimi had learned the reasons Shusei had become master of the Ho House: to alleviate the dark feelings he felt toward Kojin and to bring about the downfall of the Hos. She understood now that the scholar wasn't truly Shohi's enemy. She just had to bring an end to his deception.

But to do that, Rimi needed to banish the emptiness that Shusei felt toward his father. As long as that pain remained, the scholar would stay in his position so he could continue tormenting Kojin.

If this goes well, I think I can bring him back.

Now, filled with hope, the cuisinology hall no longer felt like a place to run from. On the contrary—it gave her courage.

"Let's get to work," the consort said to herself, rolling up her sleeves.

She started with the mounds of papers strewn across the tables. One by one, she reviewed their contents. She was looking for anything she didn't already know or that she felt would be useful for dealing with Kojin.

It'd be nice if there was something that talked about the eating habits of students. I should check the shelves after this. Hopefully, I can find something

about soothing anger or calming emotions.

Rimi wished that Shusei were there. He knew the contents of nearly every piece of writing in the entire hall.

“Ah, here is what you’re looking for,” he would say without hesitation.

“My word, this place reeks of dust,” came a disgusted voice.

Rimi turned to see the hall’s entrance blooming with florid colors.

“So, Yo, Ho, On, it’s nice to see you. Forgive me for making you come all this way,” Rimi said.

The four consorts gazed around the hall in wonderment as they entered.

Consort So, who had complained about the smell, was covering her nose and mouth with her shawl while using one of her sleeves to fan herself.

“Ugh, I am going to be absolutely covered in dust,” she complained.

“Then feel free to wait outside. Having this many books in one place is a marvel,” Ho said, striding into the room without hesitation. She approached one of the shelves and began rifling through the arranged books.

On entered timidly, gazing wide-eyed at the sheer height of the bookcases.

“How do you even get the books up there...?” she marveled.

Yo darted through the doorway and raced to Rimi’s side, snuggling up and looping her arm around Rimi’s.

“What are you doing, dearest?” she asked.

“I’m looking for books or papers that I’ll need for my journey. Wait, I know!” Rimi suddenly exclaimed before turning her attention to each of the consorts. *“Since you’re all here, could you do something for me? If I asked you to find writings on a certain subject, could you help me look through all of this for it?”*

“Absolutely not!” So cried from the entrance without a trace of hesitation. *“I don’t even understand why you’re going all the way to Tei in the first place. Explain yourself. First, you disappear to who-knows-where, and now that you’re back, you say you want to leave for Tei?!”*

“Err, well, I want to meet with Chancellor Shu so I can—”

“But you’re the empress-to-be. Why would you need to meet with the chancellor?” On asked curiously.

It was a long story, and Rimi preferred to keep the news that Kojin had ignored the emperor’s orders a secret. Anyone would wonder why the chancellor had suddenly left the capital, but she doubted they would guess it was from a falling out with the emperor. She could tell no one, not even the consorts.

“His Majesty needs me to go,” she said.

The four consorts exchanged puzzled looks. They seemed to reach a silent consensus and nodded to each other.

“It must be something really important then,” Yo said, looking up at Rimi with big, round eyes.

The consorts had clearly realized that Rimi wasn’t able to explain her reasons. She appreciated how sharp they could be. They had also likely heard that Kojin and Renka had been held in the Hall of Law and Culture for some time. From that, it would be easy for them to draw their own conclusion.

“Yes. Very important,” Rimi said.

“No choice but to go then,” Consort Ho said with a shrug. “We’ll help you search. What sort of books are you looking for?”

“What?! Think of the dust!” So suddenly cried. “If we start dragging books out, then—”

“Nobody’s making you help, So. You can just stay there and watch,” Yo said indifferently. “I’m going to help my dearest look.”

“Me too,” On added with a smile. “You can just wait over there, So. Or if that’s too boring, you could always go back to the rear palace.”

“Are you trying to get rid of me?!” So asked indignantly, marching into the hall without thinking.

“Oh, are you going to help?” Ho asked with a faint smile.

“Of course I’m going to help,” So said, turning her nose up. “Lady Setsu, hurry up and tell us what you’re looking for already! I’ll find it faster than anyone.”

“Thank you, Consort So,” Rimi said.

Ho seemed pleased with herself for manipulating So. Yo and On exchanged looks and smiled. As Rimi looked around at her friends, she smiled as well. She hadn’t enjoyed herself this much in a long time.

“I’d like to find anything related to the eating habits of students. Also, anything about ingredients that improve mood or calm anger. Oh, and anything on the cuisines of the Southern Trinity and the town of Koto in Tei,” Rimi explained.

“Leave it to us!” the four consorts said before heading to the bookshelves.

Consort Yo had never been the bookish sort, so she had a troubled expression as she skimmed the shelves. The other three, more avid readers, seemed to enjoy the experience. They looked at the groupings of books, guessed at contents from the titles, skimmed them to confirm, and finally, placed their finds triumphantly on a table.

Meanwhile, Rimi continued working her way through the mounds of papers on the tables. Every one of them was full of Shusei’s refined handwriting.

Among the mess was one collection of papers that was even neater than the others. The paper was high quality with neat and carefully aligned writing on it. There were no errors in the writing, nor were there any ink smudges. It even contained a simple diagram. Every part of it spoke of the writer’s passion. It seemed more like something out of a book rather than a mere draft paper.

Here it is. Wushuibing.

Drawn on the page was a simple pastry resembling a five-petaled flower. According to the notes, it was a celebratory confection that had been made in the Southern Trinity for hundreds of years. It was a sweet paste of white beans wrapped in thin dough and lightly baked on both sides.

The white bean paste was mixed with a Southern Trinity fruit known as dragonflower fruit. The treat was prized for the distinctive floral scent of the sugared fruit. About fifteen years before, Kojin had proposed that the country begin importing dragonflower fruit, leading to wushuibing being adopted in Annei as a trendy, exotic treat.

The name itself, meaning “nap cake,” was apparently a direct translation of the name used in the Southern Trinity. Some said the treat induced such a relaxed state that one ended up being lulled into an afternoon nap. Others said it was because the delicacy induced such an eye-opening experience that eating one was like awakening from a pleasant nap.

Huh. I’ve heard of a name having multiple meanings before, but those seem like total opposites.

It was funny to think about. She supposed it was just like when two people have entirely different views of the same thing.

Shusei’s notes on wushuibing were extremely neat and precise. He’d liked them as a child, so maybe he had some emotional attachment to them.

There was a long, rambling note included with the description of the dragonflower fruit, talking about how the aroma was especially powerful and, while pleasant to those accustomed to it, could be revolting to those who weren’t. It even insisted on the point that some could eat the fruit repeatedly and never grow used to the smell.

The note’s inclusion was odd. It almost came across as a complaint and didn’t seem to fit with the rest of the carefully prepared notes.

Rimi decided to take the papers with her, adding them to the pile of books she intended to pack.

“Take care of yourself, Lady Rimi,” Ho said worriedly as she brought over another of her many finds.

“I’ll be okay. Master Jotetsu will be joining me as my bodyguard. And I don’t think Chancellor Shu will do anything to me anyway. My biggest worry is that he’ll turn me away without even seeing me,” Rimi said.

If it came to it, she had readied herself to sit down right in front of the gate and refuse to move.

“With Jotetsu and I leaving and the chancellor gone, I’m worried His Majesty will be lonely too,” Rimi added. “He will have you and the other consorts though. I hope you can keep him company.”

“It won’t just be us. He has the ministers and Hakurei as well,” Ho said, though she suddenly frowned. “But I’m worried about Hakurei. I’m afraid he might get himself into a dangerous situation.”

Ever since the events at Castle Seika, Ho had viewed the eunuch with disgust. It was surprising to hear her express concern for him.

“You’re worried about Master Hakurei? I don’t really see what would be dangerous about directing the rear palace, though.”

Ho glanced around before leaning in.

“Hakurei is trying to help His Majesty by investigating the Ho House’s actions. His Majesty hopes that the cuisinologist’s betrayal is a ruse. Hakurei and I are worried he might be letting his guard down,” the Virtuous Consort explained in a hushed voice.

“But if it really is a ruse, would letting his guard down be that bad?” Rimi asked.

It was the truth, after all. Rimi believed it, and Shusei himself had said it was true, which meant there wasn’t any real danger in letting the emperor hope. It also meant that Hakurei’s attempts would probably prove fruitless.

“Do you think somebody just playing at being an enemy would drive His Majesty into a corner like this?” Ho asked.

Rimi flinched. In truth, she *had* felt something was off about Shusei’s admission that it was all for Shohi’s sake. The consort looked away from Ho, her composure a bit shaken.

“I don’t really know,” Rimi admitted.

“Exactly. Nobody does. That’s why Hakurei’s looking into it,” Ho said. She gave a small sigh but forced a smile despite the worry in her eyes. “Anyway, just come back safe. I want you to cook more sweets for us when you get back. Let’s all have tea together.”

“Okay!” Rimi said, hiding her doubts behind a smile and a nod.

The future empress bundled up the books the four consorts had found, along with the papers she’d picked out herself, and left the cuisinology hall. She went

to give Shohi a final goodbye, then headed for the Palace of the Water Spirit. Jotetsu was already there, having finished his preparations as well.

They departed the palace early the next morning. Rimi sat in a small single-horse carriage while Jotetsu rode alongside it. They traveled beneath the morning sun together nearly a full day after Kojin's departure. The chancellor would likely be arriving in Koto soon.

II

Sitting on the second floor of a teahouse, he was looking down on the people in the streets as Annei's bustling nightlife played out. He didn't have many sources of enjoyment, but lately, he'd found that looking down from teashop windows like this had been an entertaining way to spend his time.

He couldn't help but smile as he watched the people wriggling their way through the flickering torchlight.

"Do you really enjoy living like this?" he asked himself amusedly.

Ever since he was a boy, people had told him how clever he was. But one thing had always puzzled him: the so-called "rules" of society that everyone, even some of the adults, seemed to innocently buy into.

His ancestors had proven themselves in battle, so the emperor had promised his family a life of comfort. As a noble, he was not supposed to mingle with those below his station. He was to consider it a point of pride that his family would faithfully serve the emperor for generation after generation.

But every time someone tried to pass down those family teachings to him, he always wondered why he was supposed to accept them as a fact of life. Yet when he asked, the answers were always the same.

"Because our valor helped build this land," or "Because His Majesty has given us this place," or the like.

But what did the deeds of some long-dead ancestors have to do with him? They weren't the work of anyone still alive.

Who cared if the emperor had granted them status? What made him worthy

of handing special privileges out? The emperor wasn't a god. He was just a man. Who said one man had the right to give privileges to another?

So, he had never cared about ideas like status. He felt ashamed of the way he and the others lived. He would slip out of the family estate to play with the village children. For years, he smuggled wheat to the families of children with sick parents.

Then one day, he had fallen for a servant girl working on the estate who he had liked spending time with. She was sweet and lovely. She'd had a way of scrunching up her beautiful, round face when she smiled. He'd loved her.

It was young love. They'd both been fourteen or fifteen and still too shy to even hold hands. But that youth meant they could love intensely. It was a love so strong, it became hard for them to think about anything else.

He'd wanted to marry her, but he knew his parents would be violently opposed once they knew. He had no idea what he was going to do about it. Unfortunately, his parents began to pick up on the truth before he had an answer.

One day, she vanished from their estate without a trace.

When he realized it had been his parents' doing, he demanded to know what had happened to her.

"One of the merchants we work with said a sailor in his employ was looking for a wife, so we let him have her," they'd said, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

He'd flown into a rage, marching off to the merchant's estate to find this sailor. The sailor's house had been a miserable shack that looked more like a stable. There was nothing but a bed padded with straw that stank like sweat.

And there she was. But she had taken only a single glance at him before she began to shake in fear and begged him to leave. She was crying. Sobbing. He realized that something had been shattered inside of her.

The moment he realized it, something shattered inside of him as well. There was a noise then, a shrill, piercing noise like a lance in both his ears. He believed that if a heart made a noise when it broke, then it was surely that sound.

“I’ve never understood how people can live such happy, meaningless lives,” he said, forcing his smile away. He picked up the white, smiling mask from the table, affixed it to his face, and stood.

At the rate things were going, he was confident that Kojin would be dismissed from his position. He knew that the empress-to-be, Setsu Rimi, had left to try and convince the chancellor to return, but he doubted she’d accomplish anything. Kojin wasn’t so simple that he could be manipulated by a little thing like her. And a woman who could read the winds like Ryo Renka wouldn’t bow to an emperor who had driven off his own chancellor.

He could already see it. Bit by bit, everything that Shohi cared about would be torn away, until finally, the worthless boy emperor would be left alone and miserable while trying to play the strongman. It would be a pitiful sight. It would be a thing of beauty.

Let’s keep going. There’s more fun to be had.

A few days before, he had met with Director Sai Hakurei, a man with beautiful golden-brown eyes that were rather difficult to read. When he looked into those eyes, he could imagine the eunuch’s tragic past and conflicted present. It made him shiver. If a broken heart was driving this man, then perhaps they had much in common.

He still hadn’t worked out what Hakurei intended by contacting the Ho House. The situation needed to be monitored carefully. But the eunuch could easily be used to add a little chaos to the situation.

The calamitous planet smiled to himself.



The prefecture of An, home to the capital city of Annei, was bordered to the south by Tei. Koto was one of Tei’s harbor cities and a prosperous one at that. It was positioned perfectly for international trade, especially with the Southern Trinity. The city was so successful that it was known as one of the two great port cities in the empire.

The trip from Annei to Koto took about two days. If one pushed through the night, they could likely make it before the second day had dawned.

The Shu House's home there sat on a clifftop overlooking the harbor. The locals called it the Autumn Garden. The gardens were full of plants and trees that flourished in the fall, making them an outstanding beauty when the season arrived.

When one looked at the beautiful cliffside building from a distance, one could see how its slate-gray roof and vermilion pillars were accentuated by the tasteful flowers and the changing colors of the leaves.

The red railings of the walkways ran right up to the edge of the cliff, offering a view of the glittering sea below.

Which was where Kojin now stood, hands on the railings as he breathed in the sea air.

He'd arrived in Koto at noon. After having lunch in the city, he'd gone to the Autumn Garden. From the gardens to the sea, this time of year brought the area to the height of its beauty. But for Kojin, none of it elicited any strong feelings.

"This place bores me," he grumbled to himself.

The ex-chancellor had spent a good portion of his youth in this house. It had originally been the primary place of business for the Shus, but when Kojin had become a bureaucrat, the Shu House had formally moved to the estate in Annei.

There was a time when the Shus had been traders, but for generations now, they had zealously pursued the path of governing. They became known as a family of regional bureaucrats by supporting and adopting those who managed to pass the appointment exams.

When Kojin was adopted into the Shu House, a series of premature deaths had left the family with no clear heir. His original family had been penniless migrants from the Southern Trinity. When the Shu House announced their desire to adopt Kojin because of his keen mind, his family didn't hesitate to give him away.

"This is for your own future. You'll have a better life with them," had been one of his parents' many pleasant excuses, but in the end, they had just wanted to

have one less mouth to feed. And Kojin knew that the Shu House had paid some money to his parents as part of the deal.

He had mixed feelings about the adoption, but he knew it was ultimately a big opportunity.

Kojin's adoptive father had ordered him to become a bureaucrat. He wasn't given any choice in the matter. It wasn't as if the ex-chancellor had fought it, though. Becoming a bureaucrat had been his goal the whole time.

I did as he asked. I even climbed my way up to the position of chancellor. So why am I back here looking at the sea?

Kojin chewed his lip as resentment toward a number of different people swirled within him.

"Kojin?"

The ex-chancellor jumped in surprise as someone called him from down the walkway. It was his wife, her clothes swept by the sea breeze as she approached.

"Eika? Why are you here?" he asked.

After refusing Shohi's orders, Kojin had returned home and immediately prepared for his journey. All he'd told his wife was that he was planning a brief vacation at their home in Koto. She would've had to leave right after him to be here now.

"Taking a break. I've been feeling the need to rest and relax, so I've come to join you," she said.

Kojin was confused. Mrs. Yo was indeed his wife, but he knew she hadn't married him out of some deep love. Maybe she'd settled. Maybe it had been a calculated decision.

But she could've stayed in Annei and enjoyed being rid of him. So why had she followed?

"You're not from Koto. I doubt you'll feel at home here," the ex-chancellor said.

"That's exactly why I'm looking forward to this. It's not home. I need to get

away from all the memories of Shusei,” Mrs. Yo said.

“Don’t say that name,” Kojin snapped, glaring at his wife.

Did she just come here to whine?

She probably wanted to hound the ex-chancellor for answers about why their son had left. But Kojin had no interest in feeding her emotional outbursts.

“If you’re going to stay here, you are never to say that name again,” Kojin spat before going inside. Mrs. Yo stayed out on the walkway, gazing at the sea with a pained expression.



As Shusei sat down to breakfast, he noticed that a letter addressed to the lord of the Ho House had been placed on the table. He picked it up, unfolded it, and began to scan its contents.

“So Mars’s report was true,” he grumbled softly.

The letter was from a merchant contact in Koto who had long assisted Shusei with obtaining ingredients for his cuisinology research. It was a response to a letter the former cuisinologist had sent two days prior. The scholar had told his messenger to push through the night. The reply had been swift, which meant it had only taken two days to get the news.

Shusei had asked if there were any signs of visitors to the Autumn Garden. The reply was even more detailed than he could’ve hoped for. Kojin had arrived two days before, followed shortly by his wife. It seemed that they would be staying for an extended period, as they had purchased a sizable quantity of food and were looking for cooks and servants.

The chancellorship of Konkoku was a busy position. A chancellor didn’t have the time to take extended vacations at their second home. It seemed that Shohi and Kojin really had been driven apart.

*The news isn’t public yet. Will they try to select a new chancellor in secrecy?
Or will they try to encourage Shu Kojin to return?*

Shusei was silently pondering the letter when Ho Neison strolled into the room. Since handing leadership of the Ho House to Shusei, Neison had been

living what amounted to a life of retirement. The scholar had pushed for it, and his grandfather hadn't fought back. However, Neison enjoyed sharing breakfast with Shusei and would join him at the breakfast table whenever he had the chance.

The old man was still healthy and wore an impressive white beard, but he seemed to have lost the hunger he had in his days as master of his house. He appeared more relaxed now that he'd handed the seat over.

"Did you get a letter, Shusei?" Neison asked.

"It's from an old merchant friend in Koto. I was just asking him about some information," the scholar explained.

"I hope it's all good news. I've heard that some of the bureaucrats who support our house are up to no good. Be careful."

"What are you talking about?"

Neison sat at the table, ordered his breakfast from a servant, and then leaned in.

"I heard there are fears that one of the generals and the Minister of Justice have been in talks with Kojin," the old man said.

"From Mars, I assume? He shouldn't be bothering you with that."

Shusei furrowed his brow uneasily. When Mars had shown him the letter, the scholar had immediately realized that it was Kojin trying to sow discord in their ranks. It was intended to be found. Even if they wrote it off as the enemy's scheming, it could create doubts in the future. The best countermeasure was to keep it a secret and not allow the news to spread.

I have to believe that Mars knows that fact as well as I do. So what does he hope to achieve by telling my grandfather?

Shusei found it suspicious, but he would only cause his grandfather unnecessary worry if he let it show.

"You don't need to worry about that," Shusei said with a smile. "It's just Kojin trying to stir up trouble. But to avoid playing into his hands, we shouldn't be spreading it around. Try to keep it a secret, okay, Grandfather?"

The scholar slipped the letter into his pocket.

“Oh, by the way, I’m thinking of going away for a few days,” he added casually.

“Where to?” Neison asked.

“Koto.”

III

“Ah! The ocean!!!”

As Rimi looked through the carriage window and saw the sun reflecting off the silvery expanse of the sea, she couldn’t help but cry out in joy at the sight. It had been nearly a year and a half since she’d crossed the ocean from Wakoku to Konkoku, which had been the last time she’d seen the waves.

In Wakoku, Rimi had lived in the mountains while serving the Saigu. And despite Konkoku’s capital of Annei residing beside the great Red River, it was still essentially a landlocked city. For Rimi, the ocean was rare, beautiful, and almost terrifying in its grand expanse. Perhaps it was the knowledge that the sea connected back to Wakoku that enchanted her.

Tama, who had been snoozing in Rimi’s lap, sat up in response to the ocean’s breeze. She stretched upward and placed her front paws on the windowsill to peek outside.

“Have you ever seen the ocean before, Tama? Isn’t it beautiful?” Rimi excitedly asked.

The little dragon’s eyes were wide and round as she looked through the window, the sea breeze rustling her silken fur. The blue of her eyes was a perfect match for the beautiful blue of the ocean.

I’m sure His Majesty is worried, but I’m glad Tama could come and see this.

Rimi gently stroked the dragon’s back while looking out the window.

Tama disliked staying away from Rimi, so when the consort decided to leave for Koto, the Quinary Dragon came with her. Shohi had been anxious about the

idea, but Tama refused to be swayed and ended up joining Rimi on her journey.

Trotting alongside the carriage was Jotetsu, seemingly enjoying the sea air from atop his horse.

“Trade ships from Wakoku come through here,” he said. “You arrived at Koto too, didn’t you? This place must bring back memories.”

“No, my ship came through the Red River,” Rimi explained. “This is my first time seeing a port. I heard this is one of Konkoku’s two great port cities.”

A hill ahead of them sloped slowly down to the bay where houses with eye-catching orange roofs clustered along the water. Large ships were anchored in the water near the piers, which must have been rather deep to accommodate them. Five or six small and medium vessels were moored in the port, and smaller rowboats milled around the bay.

“Which house belongs to the Shus?” Rimi asked.

Jotetsu pointed up at a cliff jutting out over the bay.

“That one would be my guess. They call it the Autumn Garden. This is my first time seeing it,” the spy explained.

Rimi looked where Jotetsu was pointing and saw a huge estate composed of several buildings. The slate-gray roofs were contrasted by a variety of surrounding plants and trees.

She and Jotetsu had left nearly a day after Kojin, which meant the former chancellor had likely arrived the day before them.

“So, what’s the plan?” Jotetsu asked. “March in right now? Or head to town and get a drink first? A bit of the old liquid courage?”

“As much as I’d like to, I can’t afford to take my time. I’m going now,” Rimi announced.

“Bold, aren’t we?” Jotetsu said with a grin before directing the carriage’s driver to head for the Autumn Garden.

Partway down the hill to Koto, a road branched off that led up to the cliff. It was a steep climb, but eventually, the hill leveled out, and the view unfolded before them. The estate seemed to have been designed with the sea as a

backdrop in mind. From a distance, it looked like something out of a painting.

A semi-circular gate was carved out of the white walls surrounding the property. One could see the gray roofline of the estate beyond that. The importance of the person who owned this place was clear.

Rimi departed from the carriage outside the gate, and Jotetsu hitched his horse nearby. Tama, after a few moments of hesitation, darted out of the carriage to hide under Rimi's skirt.

The estate seemed quiet. Despite the size of the place, there didn't seem to be many servants.

A handmaid who had noticed the arrival of their carriage appeared. She bowed her head to Rimi, apparently recognizing her. The consort recognized the servant as well. Rimi had only seen her briefly, but she was the handmaid who'd come to Renka's estate with Mrs. Yo.

"I know you from...the Ryo estate, wasn't it?" the handmaid asked as she approached them.

"Please, forgive the sudden intrusion. I am Setsu Rimi. I came here from Annei in the hope of seeing Chancellor Shu. Could you let him know I'm here? He knows me."

"Setsu Rimi, was it? Give me a moment and I'll tell him," the handmaid said before disappearing inside. She was gone only a few moments before returning with an embarrassed expression.

"Forgive me, but Master Kojin says he's never heard of you. He asked me to send you away. I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

"He's awfully forgetful, isn't he?" Jotetsu quipped with a wry grin.

Rimi knew that meeting him wasn't going to be that easy, of course.

"I'd really like to see him. Could you ask him again?" the consort asked.

The handmaid shook her head as if Rimi had just asked the impossible.

"It's impossible. Once Master Kojin has given an order, he won't simply change his mind. Just the thought of trying to ask him again..."

“I understand,” Rimi said with a respectful nod. She’d prepared herself to be refused. “I’ll just wait here until he agrees to see me then.”

“It won’t matter how long you wait. He won’t see you. Please, just leave.”

“I can’t. I have my reasons. I’ll do my best to stay out of your way, and I won’t take a single step inside. But I’m not leaving this spot,” Rimi said, smiling at the handmaid as she moved over beside the gate.

“Well, I suppose you won’t be in the way over there,” the handmaid said.

“No, I won’t,” Rimi agreed.

True, she wouldn’t be in the way. But she would make for a very sad sight. If she could get the servants to feel bad for her and complain to Kojin, then he might come out and yell at her. That would be enough.

The handmaid still seemed a bit concerned about Rimi but returned inside.

Rimi and Jotetsu sent the carriage driver to town, telling him to find an inn to stay at. The spy then leaned against the wall, crossed his arms, and looked up at the sky.

“So, how long do you plan on waiting?” he asked.

“I plan on waiting until he comes out to see me,” Rimi responded.

“Who knows how many days that’ll take? Seems like it’d just be faster to pull out my sword and force our way in.”

“That would probably be faster, but I don’t think it would help us convince him.”

“You’re not wrong,” Jotetsu said, seemingly out of ideas as he looked back up at the sky.

They continued to stand and wait, but the estate remained quiet. There appeared to be no sign of anyone coming out.

Eventually, the sun began to set. As it fell beyond the sea, the water turned a beautiful, dazzling shade of orange. The light soon faded and darkness fell. As the autumn insects began to sing, Jotetsu began to root around in the bag on his hip.

“Probably time we ate something. Let’s see... Here we go,” he said, pulling out something shriveled and offering it to Rimi.

“Is this...food?” Rimi asked.

“Jerky. Here, have some water too.”

The spy pulled a gourd from his hip and shook it, producing a sloshing sound inside.

Realizing she wasn’t in a position to be choosy, Rimi gratefully bit into the meat. It was tough and salty at first, but as she chewed, the rich flavor of the meat began to come out. It tasted surprisingly good. Tama sat on Rimi’s hand and gnawed away at some of the jerky as well.

“Did you make this, Jotetsu? It’s good,” the consort said as she chewed.

“Learned it from my mom,” he responded, raising his chin proudly.

Jotetsu had once told Rimi that his mother had been a spy who’d gotten on someone’s bad side and had been killed for it. Her heart ached for him as she remembered the story, but it also made her curious about his father.

“What happened to your father, Master Jotetsu?”

“Oh, he’s alive and getting himself into all kinds of trouble.”

“I’m glad to hear he’s well. But you spend so much time in the palace. Don’t you worry he gets lonely? Do you ever think of visiting him?”

“Trust me, I see more of him than I like to. Hell, I don’t even want to see him right now, but I’m gonna have to.”

Rimi gave a confused look at the last remark.

“Don’t worry about it,” Jotetsu said with a grim smile. “I don’t view the old man as a father. I hate him, frankly.”

He hated his father to the point that he didn’t even see him as one? How could Rimi not worry about something like that? But Jotetsu seemed like he didn’t want to speak about the topic any further.

“I hope you manage to patch things up,” the consort commented before dropping the subject.

Fatigue began to creep into Rimi's legs and back. The consort longed to sit down, but she wanted to hold out a little longer. She straightened herself up, but the desire to sleep was starting to take hold as well. Tama, who was sitting on her shoulder, yawned. Appearing to have a hard time fending off sleep, the dragon slipped back beneath her skirt.

He really isn't budging, but that's to be expected. This is Chancellor Shu we're talking about.

It was nearly midnight when doubt began to plague Rimi. She'd tried and failed. She felt bad for making Jotetsu wait with her as well.

Maybe we should just regroup for now.

This could possibly be a prolonged battle. If that were the case, she wouldn't be able to stay standing forever. Perhaps it would be best to make some preparations for bad weather and settle in.

"Master Jotetsu? I was thinking...maybe we should—"

"Someone's coming," Jotetsu said, straightening up and cutting Rimi off before she could suggest giving up for the day.

The consort followed his gaze to see the flickering of a lantern in a garden beyond the gate. The flame seemed to be approaching and eventually came to stop by the entrance.

"Wait...aren't you Sunny?"

It was a woman with a kind face: Mrs. Yo. Her eyes went wide as she saw Rimi's face, and she quickly straightened her posture to give a proper bow.

"Mrs. Yo, forgive me for intruding," Rimi said.

"What is going on?" Mrs. Yo asked. "My handmaid seemed preoccupied with something outside, so I asked her if something had happened. She said a woman named Setsu Rimi had refused to leave in spite of being turned away. I thought I'd come and try to convince you to go home, but...I take it you're Setsu Rimi? So you're not Sunny, then?"

"That's right. It was a name I picked up while working in the kitchen at Ryo Renka's estate. My real name is Setsu Rimi."

“I did find that whole business at Renka’s odd. You seemed so well-dressed and disciplined. You didn’t come across as a cook to me. Just who are you? What did you come here for?”

“I’ve only completed my Executive Audience, but I’m essentially the empress-to-be. I also serve at His Majesty’s side.”

“The empress-to-be...? You...?” Mrs. Yo said. She gave Rimi a long, hard look, seemingly reappraising her.

“I’m here on His Majesty’s behalf to see Chancellor Shu,” Rimi announced.

“His Majesty sent you? What possible reason could he—”

“The emperor would like Chancellor Shu to return to the palace,” the consort quickly continued, hoping to get Mrs. Yo to listen by pushing through the schoolteacher’s fear and doubts. “So I am here on his behalf. Could you speak to the chancellor for me? I’d like to speak with him personally about His Majesty’s feelings.”

“If Kojin’s refused to see you, he won’t change his mind. That’s just the sort of person he is. Although...you said you’re here as an emissary? And that His Majesty wants Kojin to return?”

“Yes. If you could get that message to him...”

After a moment of careful thinking, Mrs. Yo slowly nodded her head.

“Very well then. I’d be happy to invite you in,” she said.

“Really?!” Rimi asked.

“I can’t promise Kojin will speak with you though,” Mrs. Yo warned, trying to temper the consort’s excitement. “I’m inviting you in as a friend I met at Renka’s. That way, I don’t think Kojin would be willing to drive you out directly. However, that’s all I can do for you. I can’t make him sit down and hear you out.”

But that would be enough for Rimi to take the next step toward crafting a plan. It was more than the consort could’ve hoped for. However, she wondered why Mrs. Yo was willing to go out of her way to help.

“If you’ll just let me in, then I can work on getting Chancellor Shu to talk to

me,” Rimi said. “But why would you do that for me? Won’t it make the chancellor mad at you?”

“Yes, I’m sure it’s going to put him in a terrible mood,” Mrs. Yo said with a pained smile. “But if His Majesty will allow it, then I think Kojin should return to the capital. My husband is a bureaucrat to his core. It’s what makes him happy. That’s why I’m inviting you in. So, come on now. Your friend too.”

Lanterns were laid near the ground along the walkway, but the rest of the estate was rather dark. None of the rooms were lit up, which showed that the Shus had barely brought any staff with them.

Mrs. Yo led them along a walkway that wove its way through the gardens. The night air was filled with the smell of salt and the distant sound of crashing waves.

Rimi was eventually led to her room, a tasteful, detached building in the center of a garden. Since it was away from the building where Kojin and Mrs. Yo lived, she was less worried about agitating the former chancellor.

“This building has two rooms, so you two shouldn’t feel cramped,” the teacher said as she led them into the building and lit the lanterns inside.

As candlelight illuminated the room, Jotetsu scanned the surroundings.

“I wish I could offer you something to eat, but we don’t have a cook on hand,” Mrs. Yo apologized. “The cook we hired lives in the city and won’t be arriving until morning. I’m afraid I have nothing to offer. But please, make yourself at home.”

With that, Mrs. Yo excused herself and left the pair alone. Some time later, the handmaid from before appeared to make the beds. The woman asked if there was anything she could do for them, but Rimi said they were fine.

“I’m sorry for making you two wait outside for so long,” the handmaid said.

“Hey, we should be the ones apologizing,” Jotetsu responded with a smile, earning a blush from the handmaid, who excused herself.

With things finally calming down, Tama popped out from Rimi’s skirt, climbed up to her shoulder, and looked around vigilantly as she wrapped herself in the

consort's hair.

"It's okay, Tama. This is Chancellor Shu's home. They let us in."

After inspecting the surroundings, Jotetsu gave a big stretch and settled himself on the windowsill.

"I've gotta say, I'm amazed they let us in," the spy said.

"I agree. I was thinking we might need to set up a little hut if we were going to have to wait there for days."

"And camp there together? I can't even imagine it. I'm glad it didn't come to that. But now what do we do? Like the lady said, we might have made it inside, but Kojin's probably just going to ignore you."

"I don't know yet. I suppose I'll start by saying hello tomorrow," Rimi suggested, unsure of what else to do.

"Oh, is that all? A casual hello?" Jotetsu said, astonished.

Chapter 4: The Port City of Koto

I

Few knew that Kojin had disregarded the emperor's orders and resigned from his post. The only people who had been present were the Minister of Rites, the Minister of Revenue, and Rimi, and afterward, Shohi had only told Jotetsu, Hakurei, and Ryo Renka.

This is turning out to be trouble, Hakurei thought as he departed the director's office and headed for the large main gate attached to the palace courtyard. As etiquette demanded of his station, he walked slowly with his hands together in front of him.

I heard that Rimi went to convince Shu Kojin to return, but I don't think we can pin our hopes on that.

If Kojin did not return, then a new chancellor would need to be picked as soon as possible. Who knew what the Ho House might be planning while they were dragging their feet?

The Ministers of Rites and Revenue would be the most reasonable choices. But would either of them be able to hold off the Hos?

Kojin had served as chancellor since the reign of the previous emperor. He was trusted and feared by many of the bureaucrats in the capital. Some said that the reason Ho Neison had retreated from the palace so quickly was that Kojin had been putting one official after another in his pocket to stifle Neison's work as minister, leaving the man unable to remain in his post.

A good portion of the bureaucrats who were loyal to Shohi likely believed in him because the young, new emperor had Kojin supporting him. If the emperor was abandoned by this particular chancellor, then many of his loyalists would surely leave him as well.

After passing through the main gate into the imperial palace, Hakurei

followed the walkways leading to the Hall of the Rising Dragon. He was passing through a section flanked by magnolia trees that had lost their flowers when someone called out to him from the garden. The eunuch turned to see a white mask peering at him from the shadow of one of the magnolia's trunks. The sunlight coming through the trees made him squint.

"Mars?" Hakurei asked in surprise. "What are you doing here? You could have sent me a message to meet you somewhere outside the palace."

"If you keep getting mysterious letters, some people might begin to suspect you, don't you think? Eunuchs can be very observant, I've found. I came to give this to you."

Mars reached down by the trunk of the tree and placed a small black vial about the size of a thumb.



“I suggest you slip a few drops of this into His Majesty’s food every day. It ought to turn your hopes into reality more quickly,” Mars said.

“What is it?” Hakurei asked, drawing a chuckle from behind the schemer’s mask.

“A little bottle of magic. Farewell,” Mars said. He slipped back among the trees, and with a rustling of branches, he was gone.

Hakurei went to the trees to retrieve the vial.

“Poison?” the eunuch asked himself.

Mars had been clever not to reveal the name or effects of the poison. If Hakurei lied about using the poison and the emperor didn’t show the appropriate symptoms, then Mars would know that he hadn’t been telling the truth.

“So I’m being tested.”

Hakurei wasn’t sure what to do with the poison, but he knew one thing.

Mars must be someone who frequents the palace. He’s able to come and go as he pleases and would be able to tell if His Majesty falls ill.

The eunuch slipped the vial into his pocket before heading for the emperor’s chambers. Shohi was at his desk, looking over a string-bound bundle of old documents. He seemed so absorbed in his work that Hakurei hesitated to interrupt. However, Shohi noticed his presence and looked up.

“And here I was wondering who it could be. Hakurei?”

“What has you so absorbed, Your Majesty?”

“I’m reading about projects from my father’s reign. If you just went by these, you’d think he was a great ruler.”

Hakurei couldn’t help but smile at the emperor’s bitter tone. He approached the desk and peeked at the papers.

“Expansion plans for our two great ports. New agreements promoting more trade with the Southern Trinity and Wakoku. Revisions of the bureaucratic appointment system allowing local bureaucrats and experts to nominate

anyone for appointment regardless of gender or status,” Hakurei read aloud. “Those revisions are what allowed Ryo Renka to take the test and become a bureaucrat. I remember that being a prominent bit of gossip around the palace.”

“But the truth is that my father was just wasting his days in the rear palace.”

“Yes, Shu Kojin was the one turning the wheels of government. He never minded the emperor’s indifference to politics,” Hakurei mused. “He allowed it because it meant the emperor’s authority was free for the chancellor to use.”

“And this is the result, is it? In a hundred years, nobody will know who my father really was. They’ll just see all this and think he was a great man. Kojin freely wielded the power of the emperor, but rather than abuse it...he used it to drive us forward.”

It may have been too late to change things, but the emperor was likely poring over these old papers in the hope that he could make sense of things. Rather than hold his head in his hands, he was trying to learn and find an answer. Hakurei found that respectable.

Shohi laid down the papers and closed his eyes.

“I’m a fool,” the emperor said. “When Kojin tried to eliminate Rimi and started making plans without telling me, I caught a glimpse of the disdain he had for me. I couldn’t take it. And I may sit on the throne now, but it doesn’t have to be me,” Shohi confessed. “As long as Kojin has the chancellor’s power, won’t Konkoku be stable no matter who is in my place? How foolish could I be for chasing him away? Without his support, I’ll go down in history as a joke of an emperor.”

“That’s why you sent Rimi though, isn’t it? Despite being worried for her safety? I don’t know what she’ll actually be able to do, but to me, it seems as if you took action, no matter how slight the chances of success,” Hakurei said.

Shohi opened his eyes and looked up imploringly at the eunuch.

“Is that all I should’ve done? Should I have gone to Koto myself?” he asked.

“An emperor leaving the palace to throw himself at the feet of a servant? You should know that your position is not to be treated that lightly,” Hakurei

chastised him gently.

“I know that very well,” Shohi said, looking away in shame. “I’d be a laughingstock. But I need to try talking to him, at least once.”

“Then we simply need him to return to the palace.”

“He’d never do that. He’s too proud.”

“Should we find someone better then?”

“There’s no one better,” Shohi said with a defeated smile. He looked silently out the window for a while. Appearing to be lost in thought, the emperor gazed at the trees swaying in the wind. But suddenly, something seemed to occur to him

“However...” he mumbled.



Rimi awoke to the soft sound of crashing waves.

Everyone must have still been sleeping because the estate was silent. The adjoining rooms that had been granted to her and Jotetsu were large and quiet, allowing the faint sound of the waves to emerge from below the cliffs.

So we made it into the Autumn Garden.

As she gazed up at the wood-paneled ceiling, her stomach began to growl.

I’ve hardly eaten anything since lunch yesterday. And if I’m hungry, Jotetsu must be starving. Maybe I should make some breakfast?

As Rimi got out of bed, Tama opened her eyes. The little dragon, who’d been sleeping beside her pillow, gave a big yawn and crawled up to the consort’s shoulder.

“You must be hungry too, Tama. Just give me a moment, and I’ll make something tasty,” Rimi said.

Tama gave a little nod. She obediently hopped over to the table and sat down.

“I’ll be waiting,” her glittering, expectant blue eyes seemed to say as Rimi departed.

The eastern sky was slowly beginning to brighten. As Rimi looked down on the city of Koto, the ridgeline of the short, rolling mountains glittered in the light. It looked like it was going to be a nice day.

Wondering where the kitchen might be, Rimi began to wander the walkways that surrounded the detached building's gardens.

Ordinarily, summer's end quickly turned gardens into sad sights. But true to its name, the Autumn Garden was just beginning to reach its peak. The gardens were adorned with plants that sprung to life in pleasant fall colors, which created a beautiful and peaceful color scheme that expressed the true joy of autumn. There were many bellflowers around as well that created an eye-catching splash of bluish-purple.

As Rimi wandered, she caught sight of Mrs. Yo's handmaid whom she'd met yesterday. The girl was standing in front of a building attached to the west of the master's chambers. It seemed to be a home for servants. The handmaid was standing outside of a room with a simple yard that contained a well. Her hands were clamped over her mouth and she had a horrified look on her face.

"Um, excuse me!" Rimi called.

The handmaid jumped and turned around with a yelp. As she realized who was there, her expression turned to relief, though she still seemed rather distraught.

"Oh, it's you," the handmaid said.

"Is something wrong?" Rimi asked.

"Just look."

The handmaid looked hopeless as she pointed into the room, which appeared to be a dirt-floored kitchen. A basket stacked high with vegetables sat at the far end. Dried food and salted meat wrapped in bamboo leaves had been carefully lined up on the counter. The kitchen seemed neat and undisturbed.

"It's very tidy, isn't it?" Rimi commented with a smile, but she then tilted her head in thought. "But the sun will be up soon. They'll need to get started shortly if they want to prepare breakfast in time. Where's the cook?"

“He’s not here, the old fool. Would you believe that he mixed up the salt and sugar last night? The dish was awful. Then, when he was leaving, he was grumbling about how he doesn’t like mornings and might sleep until noon!” the servant exclaimed. “I had a bad feeling about him, but he was the only cook I could find around here. At this rate, we aren’t going to have anything for breakfast.”

“No breakfast...?” Rimi said, despairing over her empty stomach.

“What are we going to do?!” the handmaid asked, suddenly placing her hands on her cheeks. “The mistress would probably laugh it off, but Master Kojin? He’ll probably call me the most worthless girl in the world and kick me out the door! And if I get sent back home, I just know I’ll be married off!”

“Married?!” Rimi echoed, shocked by the sudden mention of marriage. She quickly hugged the despondent girl. “I don’t know what you mean by that, but it’s going to be okay! Don’t worry. I’ll take care of breakfast!”

II

The girl looked up at Rimi with tears in her eyes.

“You? Make breakfast? Don’t be ridiculous!” she shouted.

“I can handle it. Just relax... Err, what was your name?” Rimi asked.

“I’m Shoyo.”

“Well, I may not seem like it, but I’m a cook. Just leave it to me, Shoyo. Although since we’re in a hurry, I could use a little help.”

The handmaid agreed and staggered into the kitchen after Rimi.

It looks like the coals in the stove have completely gone out. Considering how long it would take to build a fire and cook a meal, we don’t have enough time to make anything fancy.

Rimi glanced at the ingredients on the counter and the pile of vegetables.

The dried ingredients take time to prep, so we can’t use those. We could use vegetables that cook quickly. Eggs too. I bet if we chopped the salted meat

finely, we could get that to cook quickly as well.

After deciding what they would make, Rimi turned to Shoyo.

“Have you ever lit a stove before? Or used a knife?” the consort asked.

“N-No. Never.”

The handmaids in the imperial palace were all daughters of noble families and bureaucrats, but the ones who worked on family estates were generally girls from rich but common families. They often received training on etiquette, so despite being commoners, they were considered women of relatively high status in the city. Therefore, it wasn't surprising that a girl like that had never worked in a kitchen.

“Well then, could you wash these greens for me?” Rimi asked as she moved a couple of bunches of leafy vegetables into a straining basket.

“I can do that,” Shoyo responded before heading out to the well.

In the meantime, Rimi went to the salted meat and unfolded the packages. She chopped the toughened meat into chunks, then began to mince them. She started the flames in the stove as she worked, and after a few moments, they began to grow large. Deciding the time was right, the consort washed some rice and added it to a pot full of water, which she placed on the stove.

The sun crested the horizon. In the blink of an eye, the kitchen was flooded with light. Steam could be seen rising from the pot on the stove.

Shoyo returned from the well with the washed greens, which Rimi took and minced. The consort then pulled out another pot and placed it on the stove next to the rice. When she felt the pot had heated sufficiently, she poured in some oil and dumped in the minced meat. Shoyo seemed shocked by the popping and snapping of oil, but her surprise quickly turned to awe.

“It smells so good!” the handmaid cried.

The kitchen filled with the smell of frying, salted meat. The consort added the greens to the mix and began to sauté them. As she worked, the rice-filled water boiled up to the rim of the pot.

“That should be good,” Rimi observed.

She cracked three eggs into a bowl, added some sugar for taste, and whipped the eggs. When she pulled the lid from the rice pot, steam erupted from within, joined by the scent of rice. She took the meat and greens, which she'd just finished sautéing, and added them into the pot, followed by a bit of salt. She stirred the contents of the pot, combined the scrambled egg mixture, then stirred it a bit more. Finally, she pulled the pot from the heat and replaced the lid so it could steam.

The consort breathed a sigh of relief and looked through the window at the sky.

"Rice porridge with salted meat and greens, coming up! After steaming it for a little longer, the eggs will get nice and fluffy too. Now you'll have something to take to Chancellor Shu and Mrs. Yo, so—"

"Oh, thank you so much!" Shoyo said, squeezing Rimi tight with teary eyes. "Now Master Kojin won't throw me out!"

"I think this is the first time anyone's made such a big deal out of some porridge," Rimi said, surprised by the dramatic display.

"We weren't able to put out anything good for dinner last night, so I was worried Master Kojin would explode if I told him there wouldn't be any breakfast," Shoyo explained. "I just know I'd get sent home and be forced to marry some man I've never even met."

"You would?!" Rimi asked in horror.

"My father is a merchant who sells foodstuffs from the Southern Trinity," Shoyo explained as she looked for bowls and spoons while Rimi assisted her. "Ever since I was born, he planned to marry me off to one of his colleague's sons. I couldn't stand the idea, so I took the opportunity to learn etiquette and have served the Shus ever since. The mistress said she'll have me for as long as I want to stay."

A political marriage, basically. It seemed that marriage was used as a heartless tool no matter what world you came from. Having been sent from Wakoku as a tribute, Rimi felt a sense of kinship with the handmaid.

"It's not easy coming from a big merchant family, is it?" Rimi asked softly.

Shoyo responded with a slim smile.

“Well, life can’t all be fun. Look at you. You had to stand outside the gate for half the day,” she said. Suddenly, something seemed to occur to the handmaid. “Come to think of it, who are you, anyway? You said you’re a cook, but you’ve got some kind of soldier accompanying you. And the mistress is treating you as a guest. But Master Kojin wanted me to drive you away. But, then again, you really can cook...”

Shoyo’s confusion was understandable. Rimi thought her own situation was quite unusual as well.

“I am a cook, but... Well, through some twists of fate, I was sent on a mission by someone kind of important,” the consort summarized, deciding the full story would take too long to explain.

“That sounds tough, being on a mission,” Shoyo said with a sympathetic look.

The pair were finishing the breakfast preparations when a bell began to jingle. It was likely a message from Mrs. Yo asking for breakfast to be served.

“The mistress and Master Kojin have taken their seats!” Shoyo cried.

The two of them flew into a panic as they tried to finish the preparations. Eventually, Mrs. Yo appeared, perhaps wondering what was taking so long. Her eyes widened when she found Shoyo and Rimi pouring porridge into a serving bowl and preparing a dish of garnishes.

“Oh my. Rimi? Why are you in the kitchen? And why is it just the two of you? Shoyo, what happened to the cook?” Mrs. Yo asked.

“He never came. But Rimi made porridge! If you’ll just give us a little bit longer, we’ll have breakfast ready,” the handmaid said.

“When we were at the Ryo estate, you were introduced to me as a cook. But...you really can cook?” Mrs. Yo asked, blinking in surprise.

“I used to be... No, I still am a cook. The people I care about often ask me to make sweets for them, and I prepared breakfast for Lady Renka. Err... I know that someone in my position doesn’t actually belong in the kitchen. But I feel like it’s what gives me value, and I’ve never really been able to stop myself

anyway, so I figure I'll just fight that idea," Rimi said. "I've already made you breakfast today, so why not let me keep cooking for you? I could stay on as a cook."

"As a cook?!" Mrs. Yo asked, stunned.

"I'm sorry. It's out of the question, isn't it?" Rimi replied, ducking her head in shame.

Shoyo clapped her hands in delight.

"It's perfect! Mistress, Rimi is so good at cooking! I think we should let her do it," the handmaid exclaimed.

"It would be a big help, but are you honestly okay with that?" Mrs. Yo asked.

"Of course. Nothing would make me happier than being able to cook here," Rimi said.

"You really are an odd one. I can't believe food could..." the teacher trailed off. She'd been smiling, but something sad crept into her eyes. "Shusei was like that too. Cuisinology this, cuisinology that..."

"Mistress..." Shoyo said with a concerned frown. But Mrs. Yo forced away the dour mood.

"You've truly saved us by making breakfast. Thank you, Rimi," she said. "Shoyo, Kojin is waiting, so please bring the food out. Rimi, please enjoy your breakfast in your room."

"Do you think I could be the one to serve breakfast for you and the chancellor?" the consort asked. "I think he should be made aware that I'm here, and this would be the perfect opportunity to let him know. I feel like the longer it waits, the worse of a mood he'll be in, wondering how long I've been here."

Mrs. Yo's look wavered as she hesitated at the suggestion, but she soon nodded.

"You're right. That might be for the best. Well, I'll leave it to you, then?"

"I'll be right there!"

"Thank you," Mrs. Yo said. She then bowed and left the room.

"You're brave if you want to face Master Kojin in the morning," Shoyo said.

"It's not that I *want* to. But if he doesn't find out that I'm here now, he's just going to get angrier when he does." The handmaid nodded.

"*Good point*," her nod seemed to say. She glanced at the doorway Mrs. Yo had left through, then leaned in.

"You heard what the mistress said before, right? Do you know about the young master? Master Shusei's his name," Shoyo said with a hint of disgust. "Apparently, he's actually a direct heir to the Ho family. The moment he found out, he ended up abandoning the Shus, just like that. Didn't even care that they had raised him. And I've heard that he's picking fights with Master Kojin now. I never would've expected that from someone so quiet. The mistress still won't say an unkind word about him either."

"So Chancellor Shu and Master Shusei are on bad terms?" Rimi asked.

Shoyo looked up at the ceiling and thought for a moment.

"I've only been training with the Shus for about three years now, so I don't know how things used to be. But for as long as I've known them, I wouldn't say they've ever been friendly. More like...indifferent to each other?"

Indifferent.

It was chilling to think that people could live under the same roof and feel nothing toward each other.

Rimi asked Shoyo to take some of the porridge to her room. That way, Jotetsu and Tama wouldn't have to go hungry. After asking the handmaid for directions, Rimi brought the breakfast to a huge room overlooking the ocean. She began to grow tense as she pushed the cart in silence.

As she approached the room, the consort could feel the sea breeze blowing gently from within. The folding door at the far end of the room that faced the ocean stood ajar. Beyond the red handrails, the water below spread wide.

A round table was situated in the center of the room where Mrs. Yo and Kojin sat across from each other.

Mrs. Yo looked over and gave the consort a small encouraging nod. Kojin

didn't even bother looking over, instead choosing to look out at the ocean.

"Your breakfast is ready," Rimi said, bowing.

Kojin snapped to attention as he heard her voice and looked over. The moment the consort raised her head and made eye contact, his expression turned steely. He looked from Rimi to the calm expression on his wife's face.

"What is the meaning of this, Eika?" he asked sourly, glaring at the schoolteacher.

"What do you mean?" Mrs. Yo replied.

"Why is someone in our home without my permission?"

"I invited her in. I met her at Renka's. She's a friend."

"Do you have any idea who she is?"

"Yes, I know very well," Mrs. Yo said with a gentle smile. Her look hardened a bit, as if she was challenging her husband. "She's a friend, and lucky for us, she can cook. The cook we hired yesterday turned out to be unreliable, so if she's willing to stay, we'll be better off for it."

"Send her away. We can find a cook, even if it takes some time. I don't care what we eat anyway. Give me a melon or something for all I care."

"Well, I *do* care what I eat. I'd like a proper meal. And she's my friend. I don't think it's your place to tell me to send her away."

Mrs. Yo turned to Rimi, who was anxiously watching the back-and-forth take place.

"Please, our breakfast, Rimi," she said.

"Just a moment," the consort said. She bowed once more, entered the room, and deftly set the table. After removing the lid from the pot, she began pouring porridge into bowls for the couple.

Rimi could feel Kojin's gaze boring into her as she worked. She began to shake from the nerves, making the bowls clatter in a terribly unrefined way.

Calm down, Rimi. Just calm down.

"What did you come here for? Are you so eager to die?" Kojin whispered

coolly as Rimi placed his bowl in front of him.

Fear suddenly seized the consort. She remembered being locked up in Master Yo's old estate. How heavy the shackles on her ankles had been. The way the chains had jangled. She felt like she was going to start shaking in terror.

"I didn't come here to die. I am here in His Majesty's name. He wants you to come back. I came to tell you that," the consort explained. She glanced over at the chancellor and saw him staring at her.

He snorted.

"Well, you're too late for that," he said.

"I don't believe that. That's why I'm here."

Kojin glowered at her.

"I don't plan on hearing anything you have to say," he said.

"Then I'll just keep working here as a cook until you hear me out," Rimi said flatly before filling Mrs. Yo's bowl and placing it in front of her. She then gave a perfect bow.

"I hope you'll forgive my presence here. Now, eat up," the consort said. She then straightened up and left the room.

As Rimi neared the kitchen, she suddenly felt the strength drain out of her legs and had to support herself with one of the walkway pillars. Tears welled in her eyes.

"That was terrifying..."

III

The fear and anxiety lingered as Rimi staggered back to her room. As she neared it, she could hear the bright sound of Shoyo's laughter. The consort peeked into the room to see Shoyo smiling as she served porridge to Jotetsu. The spy had an enormous smile of his own.

When Shoyo noticed Rimi's presence, she seemed deeply relieved.

"Rimi! How did it go? Master Kojin didn't say anything awful to you, did he?"

“He asked me if I wanted to die, but Mrs. Yo was there, so it turned out fine. I just sort of declared that I’d be staying,” Rimi said as she sat down at the table and Shoyo appreciatively set out a bowl full of porridge for her. “I’m sorry I had to make you help with breakfast, Shoyo.”

“Not at all! It was a lot more fun doing that than waiting on Master Kojin,” the handmaid said.

“Our host was just telling me just how much of an awful, stubborn goat Shu Kojin is,” Jotetsu said with a grim smile.

“The mistress is just so kind! It’s bizarre that she’d choose a man like that. He never smiles, he’s always so angry, and he’s terrifying to look at. I’d never marry somebody like him,” Shoyo declared.

The handmaid seemed to have a lot of built-up resentment toward the chancellor. After venting for a while, she eventually took her leave.

“It’s always fun to hear the handmaids complain about their employers. Especially if it means bad-mouthing Shu Kojin,” Jotetsu said with a hint of nasty satisfaction.

Tama, who had been staying in the back room, came bounding out as she noticed Rimi’s return.

“Come on now, hurry it up!” the dragon seemed to say as she plopped down on the table and eagerly wagged her long, silken tail.

“I’m surprised to hear you enjoy that, Master Jotetsu,” Rimi commented as she placed a bowl of porridge in front of Tama. The little dragon had apparently been waiting eagerly because she dove her face into the bowl and started eating.

“Handmaids don’t really hold back, and they pick up on a lot of things. I love talking to them,” he said.

“Ooh. That makes me wonder, what kind of women do you like?”

“I like them pretty, curvy, and cheerful. You’re not quite there on the second one. Especially up top.”

“...I’m sorry, I suppose I am pretty flat...” Rimi said, looking disappointedly at

her own chest as she picked up her spoon.

Jotetsu ate several bowls before he was full and reached for his tea.

“So, what’s the plan now?” he asked.

“I announced I would be working as their cook until he was willing to listen to me. I think I should start by getting my luggage and then send the carriage back to the capital. Then I’d like to go into Koto to look for ingredients.”

“A bit of sightseeing in a port city, eh?” Jotetsu said with a pleased smile.

After bringing her luggage to the Autumn Garden, Rimi asked the driver to bring the carriage back to Annei. She gave him a letter addressed to Shohi as well, informing the emperor that she had made it into the Shus’ home and would be staying to try and convince Kojin to return, but it would take some time.

The only employees that Kojin had brought were a stableboy, a carriage driver, and three servants. Mrs. Yo had brought Shoyo and two maids.

Considering the size of the estate, the family was brutally understaffed. When Rimi mentioned to Shoyo that she wanted to go to town and buy ingredients, the handmaid had given her a generous sum of money.

“Here, just buy whatever we need,” Shoyo said. Apparently, she was too busy working around the grounds to go shopping.

Rimi and Jotetsu departed on foot for Koto. Tama joined them, apparently eager to see the sights from atop the consort’s shoulder.

The city of Koto was crowded with buildings, all of which had curved eaves and white stone walls that were soaked in the sea air. The smell of the ocean permeated every corner of the city, and the breeze that blew in from the water seemed to have rubbed off on the people. Everyone seemed so much more cheerful and lively than in Annei.

The men were unsurprisingly tanned, but so too were the women and children. Rimi’s fair skin stood in stark contrast to the people around her. She almost looked sickly in comparison.

The closer they came to the harbor, the stronger the smell of salt became. Eventually, they arrived at the market, which stood on the shore.

Huge bamboo baskets lined the market with woven mats covering them to protect their contents from the sun. There was food heaped everywhere, and it was all for sale.

“Look, Master Jotetsu! They have fish! And it’s so fresh! And look at that seaweed! I’ve never seen that kind before! It looks like umifu but it’s so small! Maybe it’s a kind of umifu? If I dried it properly, maybe I could use it as a substitute. Oh, over there! Shellfish!”

Baskets were packed full of some kind of stripey shellfish that breathed a foam of transparent bubbles. Beside them, haphazard mounds of fish beat their tails violently. Tama, seemingly startled by the sight of the writhing fish, wrapped herself up in Rimi’s hair and timidly peeked her head out. None of the citizens seemed to pay any mind to the little dragon on Rimi’s shoulder. Occasionally, a passing child would comment on how cute her mouse was, but that was it. People from port cities appeared to be accustomed to unusual sights.

Koto is just...incredible!

Fish, shellfish, seaweed—there were so many new sights, and all of them were freshly glistening, having just been pulled from the sea. Rimi would only need to add a bit of salt and boil or grill them for a while, and they would surely be delicious. She couldn’t help but get excited at seeing so many new things for sale.

“I want to get some fish. Some shellfish too. Oh, and I saw a bunch of some kind of dried food that I’ve never seen before. I’d like to get some of that as well,” Rimi announced as she dragged Jotetsu from stall to stall, buying things and sending them to the Autumn Garden.

She couldn’t spend everything on rare seafood, however, so the consort eventually made her way from the harbor market to a part of the city lined with shops. Some shops were selling wheat, rice, oil, and meat, but there were also places to buy unusual goods and ingredients from foreign lands. Not very surprising considering this was a port city.

There was also an impressive three-story building that sold spices. When Rimi peeked inside, she found that Saisakokuan spices were also available for purchase. The consort was shocked to see how much they cost considering how freely Shuri had used them.

If this is how much Saisakokuan spices go for, then Konkoku would be very well off if they could make a trade deal with Saisakoku to directly import spices.

Spices could be purchased from Saisakoku and then resold to other nations at a higher price. It was understandable why Kojin was so fervent in his desire to have the emperor marry Aisha, the Saisakokuan princess.

After buying the wheat and rice she needed, Rimi was about to return to the estate when she caught sight of a shop selling dried goods. They seemed to sell mostly fruits and pulses, but as she approached the store, she noticed a pleasant floral scent.

Sitting inside some sort of tub was a pile of reddish-brown dried fruits the size of quail eggs. They appeared to have been candied, judging by the crystalline sheen on their surface. The floral scent seemed to be coming from them.

“Dragonflower fruit. They’re good. Nice and sweet,” Jotetsu explained as Rimi marveled over the unusual fruit.

“So these are dragonflower fruit...”

It was the key ingredient of wushuiping that was mixed in with the bean paste.

Master Shusei loved wushuiping. I’d like to try making some.

Rimi asked for a price, which turned out to be rather reasonable. Still, however much she wanted to make wushuiping, it wouldn’t be right to use the money Shoyo had given her, so Rimi bought it with her own money instead.

With the fruit wrapped in paper and placed in her pocket, Rimi found she smelled faintly of flowers, as if she’d put on perfume.

Upon their return to the Autumn Garden, the consort went straight to the kitchen, rolled up her sleeves, and tied them in place. The food she’d ordered at the harbor had arrived just as she was returning, so she was greeted by a

mountain of ingredients waiting for her on the counter.

Let's start by feeding them something tasty for every meal.

If she wanted to convince Kojin of anything, she would start by treating him to something delicious. It would be impossible for him to stay angry if he was eating something good, satisfying his instinctual needs. That was why feasts were a key part of diplomacy and politics. People were more at ease when their needs were being met.

Being able to cook for him will give me a chance to convince him with every meal.

Tama sat on the counter and stared unblinkingly at a red fish with astonishingly large eyes. It looked like the dragon and the fish were locked in a staring contest. Rimi looked down at the fish too, wondering what she should make with it.

Jotetsu, who was helping to haul in some of the ingredients, came to stand beside Rimi with his hands on his hips.

"Nothing like a port city, I tell you," he said in admiration. "It looks great. You can only get stuff like this by the sea."

"You're right. It's so freshly dead!" Rimi said.

"Freshly dead...?" Jotetsu repeated, flinching.

"Is something wrong?"

"You just have such a way with words."

If the fish had just died, wouldn't it make sense to call it freshly dead? But rather than ponder that, the consort decided she needed to focus on deciding what to make for lunch.

"If it was you, what would you want for lunch, Master Jotetsu?"

"Personally, I like something with some bite to it. Fish tends to be kinda bland, so I'd rather have some real meat for lunch."

"You have a point," Rimi said as she looked up at the masculine spy.

Kojin wasn't muscular like Jotetsu, and he was considerably older. But even if

his appetite wasn't a match for Jotetsu's, the chancellor would likely want to eat something substantial. Konkokuan lunches were generally supposed to keep someone going until sundown.

Even if I make something heavy with powerful flavors, if it uses fish as a base, I don't think it'll really have much impact.

As Rimi thought, an idea occurred to her.

"But maybe..." she muttered.

The consort rushed into the storeroom and began to search. On a shelf near the back, she found what appeared to be leftovers from dinner the night before. She grabbed a bowl of cold rice and emerged from the storeroom with a grin.

"What is it? 'Maybe' what?" Jotetsu asked, confused.

"I thought if I was lucky, I'd find what I needed, and I did! Leftovers," she said with a grin. "I know what we're having for lunch."

Chapter 5: Unearthing Hidden Thoughts

I

Kojin was dozing in his room, his shenyi's sleeves swayed by the ocean's breeze as he relaxed in a wicker chair imported from the Southern Trinity.

The former chancellor hadn't napped since before his student days. As a bureaucrat, there was too much to do, too much to think about. No time was left over for relaxing. But since he'd left the imperial palace, nothing was required of him, and there was nothing he felt compelled to do.

He felt utterly empty, like someone had pulled at his seams and unraveled him. The only thing he felt was the wind blowing through him. Never in his life had Kojin felt more bored.

As he slept, he felt caught between dreaming and consciousness. His thoughts were scattered and half-formed.

What is His Majesty thinking, sending that girl here?

The irritation that had nagged the former chancellor earlier that morning began to simmer inside of him again. As if dredged up by those stirring feelings, an image from the past appeared in his mind.

He could almost see them: Seishu and his Shokukokuan princess embracing in the bamboo grove. She was slender, beautiful, and always so reserved. The few times Kojin had met her, she'd always kept her gaze cast downward.

"Seishu! Master Yo is calling!"

The couple, startled, pull away from each other.

"Okay!" Seishu calls. He takes the girl by the hand and leads her out of the bamboo grove, explaining that he needs to go see the master. He asks Kojin to take her to the gate. A handmaid is waiting for her, Seishu says. Kojin scowls, but Seishu bows and begs, so he gives in.

Kojin can feel her following behind him, and with every passing moment, he becomes more irritated by her presence.

“What do you think you’re doing, meeting with Seishu like this?” he finally asks, despite himself. “You realize you’re just going to cast a shadow over his whole future?”

It had been years since he became a student, and Kojin had always had a single dream: for Seishu to be emperor and Kojin to be his chancellor. Together, they would usher in a new age of prosperity for Konkoku.

Kojin had despised the idea of serving a foolish emperor, but he had no qualms about serving Seishu. All of the bureaucrats would have loved him. If Kojin could carry out his duties while serving a man like that, he could’ve helped his country prosper. There was no better, more exciting way to live his life.

And yet.

When Seishu had met the girl, he’d started talking about marrying her. His family had been stunned when they’d heard it. If he married a Shokukokuan royal, there was no doubt it would keep him from the throne. The Hos desperately wanted Seishu to take the throne, and most of the palace bureaucrats felt the same. If not for the girl, Ho Seishu would’ve certainly ascended. Compared to Seishu, the Ryu prince was a half-wit.

“I know that,” she responds. The answer makes Kojin even more irritated. He can’t resist stopping and turning to face her.

“If you realize that, then you should leave and never return,” he counters.

“I agree,” she says with a nod. “I just told Master Seishu the same thing. But he won’t hear of it. What should I do? Master Seishu says you’re the cleverest student here. Surely you can come up with a solution?”

Kojin doesn’t know what to say. The look in her eyes is sincere. She really wants an answer.

I don’t have a chance of convincing him. He loves her. It doesn’t matter what I say to him, he won’t hear me out, *Kojin thinks*. So maybe we should just have her leave this world.

It would've been the easiest solution, but Kojin had feared that Seishu might have turned into an empty shell if he'd lost his beloved. It also just seemed too cruel, telling an innocent woman to die. He'd had the feeling that she'd take her own life without hesitation if she thought it would help Seishu.

"I don't know either," he says.

Kojin had regretted that answer ever since. If he'd just told her to die, maybe he wouldn't have lost Seishu.

Why didn't I just tell her to die?! That Setsu Rimi ruined everything!

Kojin's eyes snapped open in a burst of anger. As much as he would like to write it off as a result of his scattered dreaming, it irritated the former chancellor that he'd mixed up Rimi with Seishu's wife. He sighed and rubbed his temples.

Why would I mistake Setsu Rimi for that girl? Is it because of how much Shusei resembles Seishu?

It had been in the spring of the previous year that Kojin had first seen them smiling at each other in the cuisinology hall. The former chancellor had felt his breath seize in his chest at the sight. He hadn't known why it had upset him so much. He'd decided to just save his business with Shusei for later and leave unnoticed.

I think I was so irritated at seeing that girl when I looked at Setsu Rimi that I decided to eliminate her. Thanks to that, look where I am. The girl still manages to ruin everything, even now.

Kojin absently stared out at the sea from his chair.

"Pardon me, I've brought your lunch," Setsu Rimi called from the entrance of the room.

She doesn't give up, does she?

Kojin and his wife had taken to sharing breakfast while at the Autumn Garden, but they had lunch and dinner separately. The consort must have heard from Shoyo that he took his later meals in his room, so she had taken it upon herself to stroll in with his lunch.

“Leave it on the table and get out,” he spat, intentionally choosing not to look at her.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that.”

The cheeky response finally earned her an annoyed glare from the former chancellor. Fear surfaced on her face for a moment, but she seemed to fight it off, straightened her posture, and marched into the room with the tray. Kojin glared at her the entire time. He could tell his gaze frightened her.

She placed the tray on the table and bowed.

“This dish is only completed at the table. I’m going to serve it to you,” Rimi said.

“Don’t bother. Get out,” he ordered curtly before rising from his seat. He pushed the consort to the side as he passed by and then sat down at the table. But he frowned as he considered the arrangement of items set before him.

On one flat plate lay bite-size chunks of fish that had been lightly battered and fried. There was also rice that had been compacted, cut into square chunks, and then grilled on both sides before being placed on another, deeper plate. There was also a small bowl full of sweet-and-sour sauce as well as small plates with ginger and shredded leeks arranged on the side. An empty bowl sat in front of Kojin, accompanied by chopsticks and a spoon.

How am I supposed to eat this?

Rimi immediately seized on the former chancellor’s hesitation and grabbed the bowl in front of him.

“Let me prepare it for you,” she said.

The consort picked up the long chopsticks sitting at the table’s edge and placed two slices of the grilled rice into the bowl. On top of that, she laid a piece of fried fish. She then took the spoon placed alongside the sauce bowl and drizzled the sweet-and-sour sauce on top of the fish and rice. Finally, she added some onion and ginger before handing the bowl to Kojin.

“I’ve made you fish and rice with sweet-and-sour sauce. Feel free to eat it now if you’d like. But if you give it a little bit, the sauce will soften it up. Then

you can use the spoon to break everything up and get a bite of fish, rice, and sauce all at once. It'll be quite tasty."

"First that business at Renka's and now this. What is it you're planning?" Kojin asked with a suspicious glare.

The girl might've seemed harmless, but after she'd served him shiguo at Renka's estate, he'd found her suspicious. He wasn't sure what she'd been planning by feeding him that, but after eating it, he'd been assaulted by memories that bordered on hallucinations. He wondered now if she had slipped him some kind of poison.

"I'm not planning anything. I just wanted to give you something nice for lunch. They were selling all sorts of unusual fish by the harbor down in Koto. I simply thought it would make a good meal," Rimi explained.

It was true; the fish laid out on the plate were a common haul in Koto.

Kojin took the chopsticks and used them to pick up some of the fish, then spread the sauce on it and took a bite. He then did the same with the rice. The breading gave the fish a satisfying crunch, and the rice was nice and crisp. With the thick sweet-and-sour sauce, it all had a very pleasant texture. As the serving was relatively small, he finished it quickly.

"I'll make you another," Rimi said.

She reached out to take the empty bowl, but Kojin quickly pulled it away. He used his chopsticks to grab some rice and fish, placed them in the bowl, and then added the sauce and garnishes.

Should I mix it up a bit?

The fried fish and grilled rice weren't bad on their own, but he thought the texture and flavor might be improved by letting them soak up the sauce and stirring them together.

Kojin looked down at the full bowl blankly and waited for a bit. He then picked up his spoon and used it to smash the rice and fish together. After a quick stir, he took a bite.

Not bad.



I'm shocked. The girl really is a cook.

The more delicious he realized the food was, the more foolish he felt. How had he let himself fall so low over a little thing like her?

Rimi had brought a teacup with her, which she filled and placed before Kojin.

“His Majesty desperately wants you to return. He was trying to forgive everything you’d done, but he let an accusation slip out, which he deeply regrets. He sent me to tell you that and see if you’ll return to him,” the consort said.

Anger began to violently boil inside the former chancellor, but he forced himself to remain quiet and continued eating in silence.

“His Majesty needs you,” Rimi continued, undeterred by Kojin’s silence. “Can’t you find a way to forget your anger and dissatisfaction with him? And if you can’t, could you at least return to the palace just once and meet with him directly? You’ll still have a chance to decide if you want to leave his service.”

After just two bowls, Kojin stopped eating. He placed his utensils on the table and reached for his tea. He took a single sip of tea and stood up.

“Clear the table and get out,” he ordered as he headed for the walkway overlooking the sea.

“Chancellor Shu, please!” Rimi hounded him.

“I have no idea why His Majesty would choose you of all people to deliver his message,” Kojin said as he came to stand by the handrail. He glanced back at Rimi. “He thinks someone like *you* could change anything? The fool.”

The former chancellor turned his gaze back to the sea, ending the conversation. It seemed to be enough to get the girl to give up as she cleared the table and left.

Trying to forgive me? He was trying to forgive me? The boy thinks I need his pardon?

Kojin scowled as he looked out at the water. He had stayed by the former emperor’s side and given everything he had to serve him. He had tried to do the same with the fool’s son, Shohi.

It didn't matter to Kojin who actually sat on the throne, whether they were clever or foolish. He would do anything to make sure Konkoku prospered. He'd wanted to be a bureaucrat since he was a boy. After all, he'd seen firsthand in the Southern Trinity just how tragic chaos could be for a nation.

For Kojin, who'd been born and raised in the warm, hospitable land of the Southern Trinity, there was nowhere more wonderful in the world. His family had technically hailed from Konkoku, but he didn't care about his supposed "homeland." He would have never even tried to compare the two countries.

But then came the civil war. Cities burned, and people died meaningless deaths. He and his family had barely managed to escape to Konkoku, but the citizens of the Southern Trinity had no choice but to stay behind. It had been agonizing to leave their friends and servants behind. They lost everything in the process.

A nation in chaos was a tragedy. He wanted to become a bureaucrat so nothing like that would ever befall the land he'd escaped to.

The emperor may have been a pillar of government, but Kojin preferred they stay out of the way. A wise ruler could make their land prosper, but one couldn't expect a rarity like that. If it had been Seishu on the throne, maybe Kojin would've seen a point in the position.

But Seishu knew about my dream and cast it aside anyway. He disappeared and left me with that fool's son.

And now the boy, whose position Kojin didn't even recognize as necessary, wanted to pardon Kojin? It was a disgrace.

Still, the more foolish the man on the throne, the more the former chancellor worried about how his absence would affect the land. But that didn't mean Kojin would go crawling back.

II

After clearing the table and leaving Kojin's room, Rimi followed the walkway leading back to the kitchen.

So even Chancellor Shu has days like that.

When the consort had brought Kojin his lunch, she'd witnessed him sitting in his wicker chair. She hadn't known how to feel about the sight. The Shu Kojin in her mind stood tall, composed, and silent. It was bizarre to see him...*lounging*. It shouldn't have come as a surprise that he could laze about, yet it did.

When the former chancellor had taken his lunch, he had tried everything to ignore Rimi. But while he might have been able to close his eyes, it was impossible to close his ears to her. It was with that idea in mind that she'd tried to communicate Shohi's feelings.

But Kojin had rejected her utterly.

"He thinks someone like you could change anything?"

Rimi knew as well as anyone that her words wouldn't carry any weight with Kojin. But she had to let him know how the emperor felt.

He's like a big wall of iron.

When he rejected her pleas, it reminded her of the despair she'd felt when the consort had fed him shiguo and how he'd recalled his student days without a hint of passion or emotion.

But I did manage to affect him then.

Maybe the former chancellor hadn't been lost in nostalgic bliss, but he had left Rimi behind. He'd made a poor decision because he was shaken. The consort just didn't know how much of an impact she'd made.

If I was able to do it once, I can do it again. I can move his heart.

The empty bowl clattered on top of the tray as she walked. It was like it was crying out for her to find a solution.

Ever since His Majesty took the throne, Chancellor Shu has looked down on him. Or maybe it goes back even further.

It hadn't even been two years since Shohi's reign had begun, so it wouldn't be surprising for a bureaucrat to look down on someone that young. But Kojin had also been friends with Renka, and she had only been a child. Was he really the type to disrespect someone just because of their age?

Maybe he hated the old emperor too? And he hates His Majesty for being his

son?

Considering the story she'd heard about Hakurei's mother being driven to her death, the old emperor didn't sound like a very good man. It would make sense for Kojin to find himself hating a man like that after serving him.

Shohi and his father were very different men, but even if Kojin realized that, maybe he was still holding on to those feelings.

Chancellor Shu tried to kill me because he thought I was in the way of Konkoku's future. It seems like all he really cares about is Konkoku. And Lady Renka said something about him fearing chaos. So for him to leave the imperial palace anyway, he must be torn between his hate and anger toward His Majesty and his desire to keep governing.

Kojin must have felt as if he was stuck in place.

It's like he's wearing an incredible suit of armor. It protects him and lets him take down anybody, but it's so thick that it drowns out everything around him and makes it hard to tell when things change.

"It must be hard..." Rimi sighed.

That powerful armor was so heavy and suffocating, and he was focused entirely on fighting. Maybe it was even the sort of armor you couldn't take off by yourself.

Kojin had always scared Rimi, and the kidnapping event had only made her fear him more. But having seen him now, bored in his seaside room away from the palace, her view had changed a bit.

As she thought back on the former chancellor eating his lunch in silence, Rimi wished she could make something for him that would soften his heart and make him cry out at how delicious it was. Putting aside Shusei and Shohi's situations, it would just make her so happy to hear Shu Kojin say he enjoyed it.



That night, Shohi summoned Kyo Kunki in secret. He ordered him to prepare a carriage so the emperor could leave without being noticed and asked that Kunki escort him.

The bodyguard was deeply opposed at first. Order or not, if the worst were to happen, Kunki would not be able to live with the feelings of shame. He eventually gave in after a compromise was made: he would select a team of five trusted and competent soldiers to serve as a team of bodyguards.

The emperor changed into a simple outfit of black cloth. He removed his pendant and changed his crown for something less noticeable.

A small, maneuverable one-horse carriage awaited him. Unassuming and painted with black lacquer, it lacked any sort of adornments.

The carriage bounced violently as they rode, and Shohi found himself thinking of Hakurei.

You're always thinking of me and giving me advice, Hakurei. And you're usually always right.

Shohi knew that he himself had many flaws. He made mistakes, lacked patience at times and was foolish at others, and he could lose himself in despair. Hakurei was a far better fit for the throne than he was.

Still, if fate had decided to make Shohi emperor, then he wanted to think and behave like one. He would surround himself with the right voices and decide the best course of action.

But if all I do is what other people tell me to do, it makes me nothing more than a puppet. It doesn't matter if I'm a great king or a fool.

At this rate, there would be little difference between himself and his father, a figurehead who wasted away his days in the rear palace. The wheels of government would continue to turn, but it would be the same as abandoning his duties as emperor.

I don't want to abandon my duties.

Rimi, Jotetsu, Kunki, and Hakurei: none of them would abandon the duties they'd been given. So Shohi had to carry out his duty as well. Maybe he had the makings of a great ruler. Maybe he didn't. But he believed if he did everything in his power to rule well, the land had to be at least slightly better off than if he'd given up on it.

An emperor needed to make decisions based on the voices around them. But surely it was also important for him to think for himself and use his own judgment at times.

“Now is one of those times.”

The carriage began to slow. They’d be at their destination soon. The hoofbeats from the surrounding riders began to quiet as well, but one picked up speed and darted ahead.

“Open the gates! I am Kyo Kunki, bodyguard to His Imperial Majesty!” Kunki called out.

The carriage slowed to a careful crawl. Shohi couldn’t see through the black cloth screening the windows, but he could make out the flickering of braziers.

It looks like they’ve let us in then?

The carriage stopped. Kunki opened the door and placed a footstool below it before kneeling to the side.

The emperor departed the carriage, finding himself in a garden lit only by the gate’s braziers and lanterns affixed to the gate’s pillars.

A potent scent wafted from the darkened buildings further within. Tobacco. As if emerging from the dark itself, Ryo Renka appeared in her crimson shenyi wearing a curious look. She approached, and when she realized who awaited her in the shadows, her eyes widened.

“Your Majesty? What are you doing here?” she asked.

The emperor looked her in the eye.

“Will you come with me, Ryo Renka?”



For dinner: shellfish.

The fish resembled littleneck clams. When they were soaked in alcohol and steamed, the seafood became fluffy. Its abundant juices turned into an incredible broth, which Rimi used to cook rice into porridge. She added the clam meat and some leeks as a way to garnish it. She also made a small plate of stir-fried greens with garlic and added a bit of kaorizuke on the side.

While Shoyo took Mrs. Yo's food to her, Rimi brought Kojin his meal. This time, however, all Rimi's attempts at casual conversation regarding the meal went ignored. When she tried to plate his food for the former chancellor, he moved too quickly and beat her to it. In the end, she was able to do little in the way of serving his meal to him.

When dinner was over, Rimi returned to her room. She flopped down on the couch, exhausted.

"You go to all that trouble cooking and aren't even going to eat dinner?" Jotetsu teased as he played with wooden shijong tiles at the table. "It was good. Look, the Quinary Dragon's still eating."

Sure enough, Tama was sitting on top of the table, face buried in a bowl as she munched away. Jotetsu's comment made Tama jump. The little dragon's eyes went wide with surprise as she realized part of her long, silken-furred belly was bulging. She immediately cleaned her fur and nonchalantly pushed the bowl away. Tama then went to the edge of the table and sat with her head drooped slightly.

I ate too much, the dragon's regretful demeanor seemed to say.

"Good point. If I don't eat, I won't be able to keep up with things, physically or mentally," Rimi agreed.

The consort tottered to her feet and went to the table. Jotetsu poured a bowl of porridge for her.

"Oh yeah, Shoyo had some news for you," Jotetsu recalled. "Mrs. Yo wants to show her gratitude for your cooking. Head over to her room when you're done eating."

"All right. It's kind of her to think about me."

"Well, she's a kind lady. That's the woman who raised Shusei, after all."

Rimi picked up her spoon and took a bite of porridge. The flavorful broth filled her mouth as it traveled down to her stomach and helped to calm her nerves. She could feel her cloudy mood begin to clear.

"So, you really think you can convince the guy?" Jotetsu asked.

“Talking to him won’t be enough. It’s like he’s wearing a thick suit of armor. Everything just bounces off.”

“Out on the battlefield, the big armored guys are easy to take care of. Just gotta grab them from behind by the collar and slip one little scorpion inside of there,” Jotetsu said as he laid tiles in a line.

“A scorpion down the collar? That doesn’t seem very sporting. But I don’t want to defeat him or anything,” Rimi clarified. “I just want him to take his armor off. Wearing something so heavy must be suffocating.”

“Then get him to take it off.”

“But how do I do that?”

“Good question. Turn up the heat? Usually, people wanna get out of armor when it gets uncomfortable.”

He’d take it off if he was uncomfortable?

Jotetsu’s words came as a flash of insight.

If it’s hard for him, why won’t he take it off? Is he just enduring the pain? It’s possible, but maybe he’s just worn it for so long, he doesn’t even notice it anymore.

That was surely why Kojin was being tormented by his emotional contradictions. He just needed to realize that his hatred was holding back all his love and emotion. To Rimi, it seemed his ability to act without emotion came from the fact that he hadn’t yet realized that.

“All living things feel.”

Shusei had said that back at Renka’s estate.

That’s right. Master Shusei is right, Rimi thought as she gazed at the surface of her porridge.

Kojin’s disdain for the position of emperor must have come from his time serving Shohi’s father. It was only after Seishu’s disappearance that the former chancellor had begun serving an emperor that he hated, which must have been the catalyst for his decision. Meanwhile, he had sought out Seishu’s location, taken in his old friend’s son as his own, and then raised the boy to be a

bureaucrat.

Rimi was certain that Kojin's suit of armor had been born out of Seishu's disappearance. Therefore, she'd thought the best way to get the former chancellor to reflect on his emotions would be to take him back to his student days before his friend had left.

But that didn't go as well as I wanted.

Just as Rimi felt she might lose hope, she could hear Shohi's voice resonate in her mind.

"Delicious."

That's right! His Majesty seemed like he was wearing a thick suit of armor once, but he's different now.

Shohi had changed. The thought gave Rimi courage, which gave her the energy to think. The consort now believed that she had been approaching the battlefield from the wrong angle. A change of strategy was called for.

I've been trying to take everything back to where it all started. But if that isn't working, what if I go the other direction?

Maybe instead of the past, she needed to use the present. There was still a powerful bond between Kojin and Seishu staring the former chancellor in the face.

Master Shusei.

It seemed that untangling the relationship between Kojin and his son would both help achieve Shohi's desires and dispel the emptiness that Shusei was feeling.

His Majesty and Master Shusei's problems stem from Chancellor Shu and his tangled history with Master Seishu. It all comes from the emotional contradictions he feels toward his old friend.

Rimi needed to focus all her efforts on unraveling those feelings. Everything was tied into them.

But how?

She had a vague idea of the direction she should approach from, but she couldn't figure out which thread to pull on. She continued to think as she ate but still had no answer by the time she finished.

When Rimi finished eating, she returned the dishes to the kitchen and left for Mrs. Yo's room.

III

Mrs. Yo's room was located in one of the most prominent places in the whole estate. It was also the only room other than Kojin's currently illuminated with lanterns, so it wasn't hard to find.

The door was adorned with floral scrollwork and draped in thin silk. Gentle light slipped through the silk and between the gaps in the door's scrollwork. Everything about the room exuded "refined noblewoman."

"It's Setsu Rimi. I'm sorry to bother you so late," Rimi called.

"Please, enter," came the reply.

The consort entered to find Mrs. Yo seated in front of a vanity while Shoyo did the teacher's hair.

"I'm sorry, you've caught me in an embarrassing state," Mrs. Yo apologized, but Rimi shook her head.

"No no, it's not embarrassing at all. You look beautiful."

Mrs. Yo must have been gorgeous in her younger days. She showed her age, and her looks had probably declined from when she was younger. But now she seemed to have a gentle, refined beauty.

She's just like the Saigu. She's still far more beautiful than your average person.

Rimi's Saigu sister had a radiant beauty, but she also had a refinement and strength that made her almost unapproachable.

"Shoyo tells me you spent your entire day cooking, and that if it was not for you, we'd have nothing to eat," Mrs. Yo said. With her hair combed and simply

tied, she ushered Rimi to a table and poured the consort some tea. “So, tell me, Rimi. Are you going to accomplish your mission?”

“I don’t know,” Rimi said, shaking her head. “You went out of your way to let me in, yet all I’ve managed to do is get him to eat. But I can’t just leave, so I’d like to continue staying here if I may.”

“You can stay as long as you’d like. Things are more lively with other people here. And if you can convince Kojin, he’ll be able to return to work, right? I think that would be good for him.”

As Rimi listened to Mrs. Yo’s kind words, she wondered the same thing Shoyo had before. Why would a gentle woman like her ever become Kojin’s wife? Especially when Renka had said that the woman had been fond of Seishu.

“Do you...care for Chancellor Shu?” Rimi asked doubtfully. The question just slipped out of her. Mrs. Yo seemed surprised by the comment.

“Of course I do. He’s my husband.”

“But Mistress, he’s always so cold to you!” Shoyo piped in, apparently unable to hold back anymore. “And he leaves you by yourself all the time! He never smiles either. Haven’t you gotten tired of him? If it were me, I’d end up hating him so quickly. Was he nicer once or something?”

“I could never hate him. I knew who he was when I married him,” Mrs. Yo said with an embarrassed smile. “And no, he hasn’t changed since he was young. He’s always been...”

Mrs. Yo suddenly trailed off for a moment. With a tilt of her head, she looked at Rimi.

“What is that? I can smell something nice coming from you.”

“Oh, it’s probably this,” Rimi said, pulling the forgotten paper package from her pocket and laying it on the table. The scent of candied dragonflower fruit grew more potent. “Master Shusei loves this smell, doesn’t he?”

The casual question drew a grim smile from Mrs. Yo.

“Oh no, he can’t stand it. One time, when he was a child, we were visiting a friend’s estate when Shusei was given some candied dragonflower fruit. He

pretended to eat it and then stuck it in my pocket instead,” Mrs. Yo explained. “Since it was the home of one of Kojin’s business partners, he wouldn’t say he didn’t like it. Kojin was in the middle of a conversation as well, so maybe he just didn’t want to spoil the mood. I don’t know if my husband noticed Shusei only pretended to eat it, though.”

Master Shusei hates candied dragonflower fruit?

Rimi’s eyes widened.

“But he loves wushuiping, doesn’t he?” the consort asked.

“That he does. He said that for some reason, he enjoys it in wushuiping.”

He hates dragonflower fruit... He hates it...?

Suddenly, pages of documents flipped through her mind.

Wait a minute!

Rimi couldn’t help but jump to her feet, earning a surprised and confused look from Mrs. Yo.

“Is something the matter, Rimi?”

“Mrs. Yo, thank you!” the consort cried as she grabbed the startled noblewoman by the hands and squeezed them tightly. Rimi then snatched the packet she’d laid on the table and clutched it to her breast.

“There’s something I have to check, so I need to go! Thanks for having me! Oh, I’m sorry to leave so suddenly, I just need to be sure. Thank you for the tea!” Rimi exclaimed, never one to let her excitement be an excuse for rudeness.

With that, she flew to the door.

“What was that about? What an odd girl,” Shoyo said with a startled expression.

Rimi could hear Mrs. Yo mutter, “I suppose she realized something.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Shoyo asked.

I’m sure Mrs. Yo understands. It’s why she’s always believed!

Rimi stopped by her room to pull out the research documents she'd brought. She laid all of them out on the floor and searched. She eventually found it: a single piece of paper.

"Here it is!"

It was the document that Shusei had written about wushuibing. She bundled it with the dragonflower fruit and left her room.

I need to get to the kitchen. I've got to check and see.

A powerful floral scent wafted from the packet she clutched to her chest.

When she reached the kitchen, Rimi laid the paper on the counter next to the dragonflower fruit and lit an oil lamp. She then stirred the coals in the stove and added some wood before returning to the counter.

As the consort re-read the contents of the cleanly written paper, she became certain she was right. She nodded to herself, placed the paper back on the counter, and headed to the storeroom to collect ingredients.

"Let's see. Rice flour...white beans...sugar..." Rimi spoke aloud as she grabbed ingredients one after another. She brought them back to the counter, then filled a pot with water and placed it on the stove.

While the water heated, Rimi pulled out a large bowl, in which she put the rice flour and then slowly kneaded water into it. When the mixture was doughy enough, the pot of water was at a full boil. The consort added the raw white beans to the boiling water, which quickly softened. When the beans were soft enough, Rimi transferred them to a draining basket, drained the water, and then moved them to a new bowl where she ground the beans with a pestle.

When the beans were ground down enough, Rimi moved them to another draining basket. She pushed them through the straining holes in the basket, turning the white beans into a smooth paste. The work was intensive and time-consuming, but Rimi was so focused that she never felt herself grow tired.

The consort placed the strained bean paste into a pot, added some sugar, and then placed it on the stove where she stirred the mixture with a wooden spatula. The sugar mixed with the beans to create a sticky, sugary paste.

Next, Rimi chopped the dragonflower fruit and stirred it in with the paste. When that had heated through, she used the rice flour dough she'd prepared to wrap up the mixture. Then, she flattened the dough balls and shaped them into five-petaled flowers.

Now they need to be steamed.

Rimi fed the stove, placed a steaming basket atop it, and filled the basket with the little dough-wrapped bundles of bean paste. After a few minutes, she moved them to a straining basket to cool.

Next, the consort placed a skillet on the stove. Once it was nice and hot, she carefully placed the now-cooled wraps of bean paste into the skillet and browned both sides of them one by one.

These certainly take a lot of time and effort to make. And considering you need fancy fruit to make them, this isn't really the sort of thing you can just throw together at home.

It was no wonder they were saved for celebrations in the Southern Trinity. Their exoticism likely meant they were more common in Konkoku than in their country of origin.

As Rimi was cooking one wushuiping after another, she noticed a beam of light laying across her arm. She turned her gaze and realized the eastern sky had already begun to brighten and cast its light through the latticed window.

The consort had been working all night, but she never felt sleepy. If anything, she was just excited to confirm her theory.

Rimi laid out the grilled wushuiping on a sheet. She'd made about twenty of the pastries. Sitting arranged on the sheet, they looked like quite the refined, understated treats.

She picked up one of them and broke it open. The surface was crispy, but the steaming process had made the inner dough white and fluffy. The bean paste was soft and thick. It seemed like it would be pleasantly smooth on the tongue. Chopped dragonflower fruit was dispersed throughout.

Rimi tried a bite.

Sweetness filled her mouth, accompanied by a powerful floral scent. It was like she'd just bitten into a flower.

I knew it.

Her heart crackled with electric joy.

All of Master Shusei's feelings are right here, from when he wrote that beautifully prepared paper and from all the wushuiping he'd eaten as a child.

With her theory confirmed, Rimi found herself staring off into space.

"I can't believe it..."



From the light slipping through the black cloth covering the carriage windows, Renka could tell the sky was beginning to brighten.

They were moving at an impressive pace, which made the carriage bounce around violently. Sometimes the wheels would jump and send the passengers into the air for a moment. All around them, hoofbeats from their escort resounded.

We're really going all out.

Renka lifted the cloth from the window and looked at their surroundings. Kyo Kunki was just outside, riding so close to the carriage that he was almost hugging it. He'd been riding all night, but the expression on his smooth face hadn't slackened in the least. It was unsurprising given he was the man assigned to protect the emperor.

The vice minister dropped the cloth back down and stifled a yawn.

"Where are we going and why do you need me?" she asked the young emperor sitting across from her, who only remained silent. "Come on, why not just tell me?"

"You'll see when we get there," he responded, arms crossed over his chest.

"You've been saying that all night. Ugh, I need a smoke."

Renka sunk into her seat but continued gazing warily at Shohi.

Who taught this boy to be an emperor?

She was hardly in a position to call others odd, but as emperors went, Shohi was pretty unusual. Renka had honestly been shocked when he'd appeared to apologize for arresting her. It would've been nothing out of the ordinary from a normal person, but most emperors were too pompous to even smile. An apology should've been beyond imagining, yet he'd done it without hesitation.

His apology had been so rare and shocking that Renka hadn't been able to keep from laughing. It had felt like someone was playing a joke on her.

But he had been completely earnest. He hadn't even gotten upset by Renka's disagreeable words.

And now they were on an inexplicable long-distance journey. They had stopped and changed horses twice along the way, and from the look of the towns they'd stopped in, they seemed to be traveling south.

"May I have some tobacco, Your Majesty?" Renka asked.

"I don't have any. Just endure it."

"I'm not sure I can. I fall apart when I don't have anything to smoke. And I'm afraid that you're the reason I'm in this situation. I wish you would've told me this would be such a long journey."

"Complain all you want. I can't give you what I don't have."

"I'm just worried that I might slip up and shout something strange in my delirium," Renka said with a stubborn smile. "'No, Your Majesty! You mustn't! Not here!' Kyo Kunki's right there. He might hear it."

Shohi narrowed his eyes angrily.

"Enough of your stupid threats."

"It's no threat. I really am feeling delirious... Ah, *Your Majesty!*" Renka moaned, causing Shohi to shoot out of his seat and look impressively flustered.

"Quiet! Enough already! Next time we change horses, I'll order Kunki to get you some tobacco."

"Very much appreciated," Renka said with a courteous bow.

Shohi rested his chin in his hand and pressed his forehead against the cloth-

covered window.

I'm not sure what he's doing, but I suppose I'll go along with it.

The situation had piqued Renka's interest. Setsu Rimi, who Shohi was apparently in love with, was an odd choice of empress. She ran around calling herself a cook, and while she was cute and had lovely skin, she was hardly an eye-catching beauty. Renka wondered why Shohi would choose her of all people.

He hadn't seemed upset when the vice minister had declared she wouldn't serve him either. On the contrary, he was in favor of it.

If an emperor like him can earn Kojin's approval, then it might be worth taking the Minister of Personnel position.

Kojin and Renka had both wanted the same thing since their student days. From their personalities to their ways of living, the two were entirely different, but they shared one thing in common. It was the reason that Renka essentially approved of him.

They both desired peace and stability. That was all. They had both suffered hardships in childhood and had personal experience with how chaos could affect the lives of the people.

Though he had hidden the truth about Seishu and made his wife cry, she knew that Kojin's fundamental beliefs would never bend.

It was the one thing Renka respected about him. Everything else about the man aggravated her.



Rimi stood in a plume of dragonflower fruit aroma. As the morning sun hit her cheeks, she suddenly came to her senses. The consort looked down at the wushuiping arranged before her and realized that there was one more thing she needed to confirm.

Chancellor Shu ought to be awake by now.

She recalled Shoyo complaining about how early the former chancellor started his day.

Rimi untied her sleeves, smoothed the wrinkles from her ruqun, and headed for Kojin's room. Her pace naturally quickened as she walked.

When the consort neared Kojin's room, she found the door was already open to let the sea breeze through. The former chancellor was inside, washing his face at the vanity with a porcelain basin that Shoyo must have brought.

When Kojin had finished washing his face, he reached out and began to feel for a towel. Rimi darted inside, grabbed a towel draped over the back of the chair, and offered it to him. The former chancellor must have assumed she was Shoyo as he silently accepted the towel and dried his face. However, he began to scowl when he opened his eyes and realized who was in the room with him.

"I don't remember giving you permission to enter," he said.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" Rimi jumped and cried. She rushed back out of the room and bowed. "Good morning, Chancellor Shu! I'm sorry to bother you so early in the morning, but there was something I wanted to ask."

Kojin ignored the consort and stepped out onto the walkway to look at the sea.

"You like wushuibing, don't you, Chancellor?" Rimi pressed.

The question apparently surprised Kojin as he turned around and looked at Rimi with a puzzled expression.

"What?" he asked.

"Wushuibing. It's a celebratory sweet from the Southern Trinity that spread to Konkoku."

"I've never had it."

"...Huh?"

"Why are you wasting my time with such idiotic questions? Get out. If you're a cook, you should be focusing on breakfast."

"Of... Of course..." Rimi said, so surprised she was barely able to form a response.

She left and headed back to the kitchen, thoughts swirling in her sleep-

deprived mind.

I was sure that he liked it too. But I was wrong. He's never even eaten it.

The scent of dragonflower fruit, which she had been immersed in since the night before, still clung to her fingers. Rimi felt like she'd followed the scent to a sudden epiphany. The realization was so enormous that it instantly sent her tired mind spinning.

I don't think wushuiping is only important to Master Shusei. I think it's important to Chancellor Shu as well!

Rimi had to stop and cling to one of the walkway pillars for support. She felt certain that this was the opening she had been looking for. But before she could ponder too deeply on that, she was interrupted by the neighing of horses coming from the direction of the gate. After realizing what was happening, she strained to listen across the garden. A guest had arrived.

Who would be here so early?

Rimi spotted Shoyo dashing down the walkway away from the consort. She quickly disappeared behind the garden trees' shadows. Her voice emerged in a shriek from the direction of the gate.

What happened?!

Any dizziness that Rimi had been feeling disappeared. She raced out into the garden toward the gate.

The consort spotted Jotetsu coming from the direction of their rooms as well. He was a little ahead of Rimi, skillfully darting between branches and plants. When he was in sight of the gate, he suddenly stopped as if something had surprised him. Shoyo was standing in the same place.

Standing in front of the gate and facing them was a young man dressed for riding with long leather boots, a short coat, and a thin cloak to keep off the rain.

It can't be.

There was a hint of surprise in the man's clever eyes as his gaze shifted from Jotetsu and Shoyo to Rimi.

"Young Master!" Shoyo gasped shakily.

It was Shusei. Jotetsu and Rimi were both too shocked by the sight to speak.

Why would Master Shusei be here?

Shusei appeared as surprised as them, but he seemed to come to his senses quickly and smiled.

“It’s been too long, Shoyo. And Jotetsu...Rimi. What are you two doing here?” he asked.

Rimi instinctively took a step forward, but Jotetsu’s burly arm was there to stop her in place. It was like he was telling her to stay on guard.

“That’s our line, Lord Ho. What do you think you’re doing, strolling into the home of your sworn enemy? We’re here on a mission, and you’d better not be trying to get in our way.”

That’s right. We can’t let our guard down with him.

Shusei himself had said he was acting in Shohi’s interest, but he also said he wanted to torment Kojin. Those two stances were at odds, and as long as Shusei wanted to continue assaulting the former chancellor, he would remain the emperor’s enemy.

Rimi couldn’t tell how that contradiction would play out.

“What are you doing here, Shusei?” Jotetsu demanded.

“I’m here to offer Shu Kojin a hand,” Shusei responded flatly.

Chapter 6: Such a Delicious Treat

I

Jotetsu was dumbstruck by Shusei's inconceivable announcement.

"Offer him a hand?!" the spy repeated.

Rimi, unable to read the intention behind Shusei's words, was growing more confused by the minute.

"Shusei..." came a shocked voice from behind them.

Rimi turned around to see that Mrs. Yo had appeared at some point. She must have come to see what the commotion was. Her hands covered her mouth in shock. It looked as if she was seeing a ghost.



Shusei had a faint, nostalgic look in his eyes. However, the moment passed quickly, and he gave her a polite bow as if he were meeting a total stranger.

“It’s good to see you, Mrs. Yo. I’m here to see Chancellor Shu Kojin. Will you let me in?” he asked.

“I’d like to let you in. If it were up to me, I’d invite you inside. B-But this isn’t as simple as when I let Rimi in,” Mrs. Yo explained while her fingers trembled. “You are master of the Ho House. I can announce your arrival. The decision lies with Kojin.”

“I think we both know he’ll say no. Just let me in, please. After all, I’m here to offer Kojin a hand.”

“Offer him a hand? I fear what you might mean by that,” Mrs. Yo replied. She shook her head, denying his request.

“Fine,” Shusei finally said with a sigh. “Then I’ll just show myself in.”

The scholar pushed past the stunned Shoyo and stepped inside the gate. Rimi quickly jumped out in front of him.

“Wait, Master Shusei,” she said

“Move,” Shusei ordered. He went to push Rimi out of the way, but in a flash of silver, Jotetsu brought a knife to the side of the scholar’s throat. He must have been keeping the blade hidden beneath his gauntlet.

The cold blade of the knife stopped Shusei in place.

“Don’t get any big ideas, Shusei. You know you don’t stand a chance against me,” Jotetsu said.

But Shusei casually turned back as if the blade wasn’t even there and smiled.

“I do. I also know you’re not stupid enough to do something like harming a man in my position. We’re on the Shu House’s property. Imagine what would happen if my blood was spilled here.”

Jotetsu clucked his tongue angrily.

Shusei continued on his way, brazenly pushing past Rimi and Mrs. Yo and heading into the garden. Mrs. Yo was stunned, but the consort didn’t hesitate

to chase after him. She tried to slip her arm around his to stop him, but it didn't work. Shusei continued marching forward, pulling Rimi along by the arm.

"Master Shusei, please, wait! At least tell me what it is you're planning!"

"I already told you, didn't I? I'm here to offer Kojin a hand."

"But what are you hoping to get out of that? Just tell me!"

"If you'd like to know, you'll have to join me while I talk to him."

"Master Shusei, you said at Renka's estate that you were still my enemy. How can I let an enemy see the chancellor if I don't know what he's planning?"

"Let me be clear: I never needed your permission to begin with," Shusei responded coldly. "I simply asked to be polite."

Rimi's arm was getting tired. The moment her grip weakened, the scholar easily slipped out of her grasp and continued across the garden.

"Master Jotetsu, I can't stop him!" she cried, turning to the bodyguard in aggravation.

"It's like the guy said. We can't touch him. Shu Kojin's still technically His Majesty's chancellor. If anything happens to the master of the Ho House here, we're in trouble."

Which meant they had no choice but to watch Shusei force his way in.

I can't believe this!

Rimi had to sprint to keep up with Shusei's rapid pace, and she caught up with him just before he'd entered the estate's main building. She clung to his back, gasping for breath. From how he navigated the grounds, Rimi could tell he was very familiar with the place. With no hesitation, he headed for the room where Kojin and Mrs. Yo took their breakfast.

The room, which was the largest one in the estate, sat at the center of the main hall. It offered an impressive view, which Kojin was enjoying from the connecting walkway overhanging the sea. At the sound of footsteps, he turned around.

"What's all this noise? Why are you—"

As Kojin saw Shusei standing in the doorway, he fell silent, too dumbfounded to speak. Shusei stepped into the room and gave a polite bow.

“I apologize for bothering you so early in the morning, Chancellor Shu,” the scholar said.

Kojin was silent and wide-eyed with shock, but it only lasted a few moments.

“What do you want?” the former chancellor eventually asked. His voice was characteristically cold and sharp, but there was something slightly off-balance in his tone. He apparently hadn’t been able to shake off his surprise completely.

Kojin and Shusei stared at each other for a moment. Neither of them moved an inch. The only sound to fill the moment was the crashing of waves.

“I’m here as master of the Ho House to offer you a hand,” Shusei finally said with a smile.

“What?” the former chancellor asked.

Shusei walked into the room, apparently unshaken by Kojin’s hateful expression.

“Do you mind if I sit? The trip was long, and I’m rather tired,” Shusei said, approaching the circular table in the center of the room. “In fact, I set out the moment I heard you were dismissed from your position.”

Rimi was confused by the comment.

Dismissed? Where did he hear that?

Nobody was supposed to speak about the quarrel between Shohi and Kojin. Even the four consorts believed that Kojin was simply taking a sudden vacation. Not to mention, Shohi hadn’t dismissed him at all.

“You came all the way to Koto chasing nonsense rumors? Do you have nothing better to do?” Kojin mocked.

“Is it really nonsense though? I heard that you haven’t left the capital since the past emperor’s reign. Especially not for a vacation.”

“You don’t think a man my age wants to rest every once in a while?”

“No, I don’t. Not when the Minister of Personnel has yet to be chosen, and

the Ho House is at His Majesty's throat. No chancellor would leave Annei at a time like this to 'rest.' You've been dismissed. I assume you made him angry with that Rimi business?"

"Watch your mouth," Kojin said. His tone was calm, but the hate in his voice was no less clear.

Shusei pulled out a seat at the table and sat down. He leaned back comfortably, crossing his legs.

"There's no need to get angry. As I said, I'm here to lend a hand," he said, smirking. "Since you've been dismissed and left with nothing to do, I thought I'd let you work for me."

Kojin's eyes widened.

"A powerful foe can be formidable as an enemy but reassuring as an ally," Shusei continued. "Why not focus your efforts on placing the Hos back into power? I know that you value peace above all else. If the Hos can bring peace to Konkoku, then it's all the same to you, no?"

Rimi couldn't understand what Shusei was hoping to accomplish with this. To employ Kojin for the Ho House, obviously, but *why*?

What are you doing, Master Shusei? Why are you suggesting this?

Perhaps it was his way of getting revenge. If his father had manipulated him his whole life, Shusei would make the man into his servant. Did he think that would make him happier?

Kojin's hands clenched into fists. Rimi could see his knuckles turning white.

"What is this, an act of pity? How arrogant can you be?" Kojin hissed. His voice trembled as if he was barely able to contain his rage. He seemed to be losing his composure.

In most situations, Kojin might have laughed the suggestion off. But it must have angered him because the ex-chancellor felt like he *had* been dismissed.

Master Shusei has to know this will make Chancellor Shu angry.

The scholar's smile certainly said as much.

“What, do you plan on retiring? If not, will you serve the Ho House? Or will you return to His Majesty?” Shusei prodded. “Ah, but how rude of me. His Majesty dismissed you. You couldn’t return if you wanted to.”

“I was *not* dismissed. His Majesty needs me,” Kojin corrected, but Shusei tilted his head doubtfully.

“Sorry to interrupt, but I’ve brought tea!” someone suddenly cried.

Perhaps she’d been waiting to cut the tension because Mrs. Yo picked the perfect opportunity to interrupt. She stood outside the room and was unfathomably calm in the face of the spiraling situation. She was undoubtedly stressed, but she hid it well.

“Were you the one who let him in?” Kojin asked, glaring at his wife.

“No, he let himself in. I asked him to wait, but he forced his way past me. We could hardly lay hands on the master of the Ho House, so he ended up getting in,” Mrs. Yo calmly explained. As she spoke, she motioned at Rimi to serve the tea.

Rimi took the tray from Mrs. Yo and began to arrange teacups on the table with trembling hands. While the consort set out the tea, Mrs. Yo sat at the table.

“Come now, dear. Calm down and sit with me,” she said to her husband.

Kojin narrowed his eyes but ended up silently sitting next to his wife.

You’re amazing, Mrs. Yo.

Calming the agitated Kojin by getting him to have a seat and drink some tea was a brilliant plan. However, if she’d just asked him to sit, he might have refused. That’s likely why she’d told him to “calm down” as well. The implication was that, if Kojin refused to sit, it meant he was the only one there who was upset.

She’s trying to steer this situation to a positive conclusion.

Rimi needed to keep calm as well and figure out how she could help. Ironically, Shusei’s demand that she think resounded powerfully in her mind.

Come on, Rimi. Think. I don’t know what’s driving Master Shusei to do this, but

if whatever he's planning will end up harming His Majesty, then I need to figure out what it is and put a stop to it.

Despite her trembling hands, the consort managed to regain some control. She filled their cups with the tea leaves, poured them full of water, and then strained them to remove any impurities. She racked her mind while carefully following each step of the tea preparation.

What can I do right now?

When Rimi finished preparing and serving tea for the three of them, she stepped away and offered a perfect bow.

"Please, enjoy your tea," the consort said as she tried to stifle her nerves.

Kojin didn't move a muscle. He just continued staring at Shusei.

"Well, Chancellor Shu? Make a decision, please," the scholar prodded calmly.

Kojin's hands began to ball into fists atop his lap once more. Mrs. Yo reached for her tea and smiled at the two men.

"He needs time to collect his thoughts before he can give you an answer. Since we have such lovely tea waiting for us, how about we focus on enjoying that for now?" the noblewoman said.

Mrs. Yo had charged in, disrupted the tense atmosphere between Kojin and Shusei, and was doing everything she could to keep their animosity from escalating.

But that's all she can really do.

As things stood, there was no choice but to let things unfold.

I can't just leave things like this. I have to find a way to help Mrs. Yo change the course of this situation.

If Kojin and Shusei continued glaring at each other, Mrs. Yo's attempt to soothe them would quickly lose effectiveness. As long as this face-off continued...

Inspiration struck Rimi. This was exactly what she'd been hoping for.

Wait, this is it! This is my chance to confront Chancellor Shu!

Rimi hid her nerves and gave a slight smile.

“Give me just a moment, and I’ll have some snacks to go with your tea,” Rimi declared, hiding her nerves with a faint smile. She wasn’t sure if her smile was convincing, but at least her voice was steady. The consort gave a bow and tried to calmly head toward the kitchen. She didn’t realize it, but her pace quickened with each step.

This is it! This is it!

Her heart was thrumming nervously. She could potentially reveal the contradictions in Kojin’s heart right in front of Shusei. Maybe she could make him aware of what Shusei was hiding within himself as well.

If she could just manage that...

Then everything will begin moving in all the right ways.



Has she gotten thinner?

Shusei’s heart ached as he looked across the table at Mrs. Yo while she reached for her tea.

He had no relation to Mrs. Yo, yet she’d loved and cared for the scholar as if he were her own son. And how had he repaid her? By abandoning their family for the Ho House and antagonizing her husband.

Forgive me. But he needs to feel what I felt, the emptiness of yearning for a man I thought was my real father.

It wasn’t a burning desire but a cold, steady one. He wasn’t sure if it was born out of hatred for Kojin or a desire for revenge, but whatever the case, the urge was constant.

Shohi had likely already learned the truth surrounding the incident with Rimi. Shusei had assumed that was the reason Kojin had left the palace. Finding both Jotetsu and the consort here had been a surprise; Jotetsu had mentioned they were on a mission as well. He had to assume they were there under the emperor’s orders.

Not to mention, Kojin had declared the emperor “needed him.” If that was

the case, it meant that Shohi knew about the former chancellor's involvement in Rimi's kidnapping, yet was turning a blind eye to the fact and continuing to place his faith in the man as his chancellor. There was a good chance that Kojin had refused the emperor, which meant that Rimi and Jotetsu had come to convince him to change his mind.

Shohi clearly understood that Kojin was a necessary asset, regardless of what had happened.

All the more reason for me to press him toward working for the Ho House. It's the reason I came here, after all.

Rimi, Jotetsu, and Mrs. Yo were likely confused by Shusei's actions. Even so, the scholar would not back down until Kojin had made a decision.

Besides, seeing his adoptive father humiliated like this made Shusei want to revel in the moment. However, seeing the old man like this was also sickening. It felt like Shusei was being forced to see something he didn't want to. It was a complex feeling. The scholar had come to attack Kojin. He had wanted to see him suffer. Yet it was far from enjoyable or cathartic. It was like digging at a hangnail. You knew it would hurt, but that just made you want to pull at it all the more.

He was curious about Rimi's sudden departure as well.

Even if she's here on His Majesty's behalf, there's no way that Kojin's heart will ever be moved by her.

In all likelihood, the only person who would've been able to reach the former chancellor's tender side was Seishu, who had passed on. Kojin hid behind a hard shell, only caring about his humiliation, anger, and plotting. There was nobody less suited to move him than Rimi.

So I have no choice but to use his humiliation, anger, and plotting to manipulate him.



Rimi's pace continued to quicken as she raced down the path.

"Rimi!" Jotetsu called as he appeared from the other end of the walkway. He grabbed the consort by the arm, stopping her. "What happened between

Shusei and the old man?”

“Thanks to Mrs. Yo showing up with tea, they’re all sitting at the same table right now,” Rimi said, looking up at him. “Master Shusei asked Chancellor Shu to work for the Ho House.”

“What the hell is he thinking?” Jotetsu said, looking deeply troubled.

“I’m not sure. But I want to try helping somehow.”

“What’s your plan?”

“I’m going to give them some sweets to go with their tea.”

“Sweets?” Jotetsu echoed. His grip loosened in his confusion, and Rimi pulled away to continue heading for the kitchen.

She found the grilled, flower-shaped treats waiting for her there, arranged haphazardly on their tray. The steam had evaporated well, meaning their undersides hadn’t grown soggy at all.

No need to overthink things. A plain white plate will do.

Rimi pulled a plate from the shelf and arranged the wushuiping in a circle. She piled the leftover dragonflower fruit into a small white bowl as well. She placed both dishes onto a tray and made her way back to the room overlooking the sea. Jotetsu was near the room and looked worried. The consort gave him a small nod before stopping in front of the doorway.

This is the last thing tying them together.

Rimi felt sure of that fact. If the final tie was severed, Kojin and Shusei would be eternally separated. Kojin would stay in his suit of armor, and he’d likely never return to Shohi’s side.

I’m...a bit scared.

When she’d given Kojin the shiguo back at Renka’s estate, he’d had such cold eyes. Thinking of those eyes now made the consort nervous about her chances.

But as she worried...

You must be prepared to fight to force the god to admit satisfaction, my Umashi-no-Miya.

The sharp voice of her Saigu sister rang out in the consort's ears. It instantly calmed her, banishing the fear from Rimi's heart.

Yes, Lady Saigu. I am.

Rimi closed her eyes gently.

But I need more than just satisfaction this time.

When Rimi had served the Saigu and the guardian deity as the Umashi-no-Miya, all she'd ever wanted was to serve them something satisfying. The more delicious, the better. It was simple and pure.

However, right now, Rimi was dealing with a person, not a god.

Now I know exactly what it was I felt when serving Master Jotetsu his Ijjiumian. Compared to the gods, humans are small and messy. Sometimes, giving them something purely delicious isn't enough to satisfy their hearts.

The Umashi-no-Miya slowly opened her eyes. Inside the room, Shusei, Kojin, and Mrs. Yo sat around a table.

But right now, those small, messy people are the ones I want to serve.

As Rimi exhaled, she could almost hear her sister's dumbfounded, gasping laughter.

II

Rimi bowed before entering the room, laid the plate and bowl on the table, took a step back, and bowed once more with the tray still in her hand.

"I've prepared something to go with your tea. Please, enjoy. I have for you some wushuiping and candied dragonflower fruit, a specialty of the Southern Trinity," Rimi announced.

"Wushuiping. Just like old times," Mrs. Yo said with a twinkle in her eye. "You loved these as a child, didn't you, Shusei?"

"I suppose so," the scholar said, evasively. Not knowing what Rimi was planning and faced with Mrs. Yo's delight, he seemed unsure how to respond.

I knew it. Master Shusei can't just say he likes it.

Kojin remained silent as he stared at the dishes. He was clearly on guard, but it really was just some wushuiping and candied dragonflower fruit, so he seemed perplexed.

“I heard that until fifteen years ago, dragonflower fruit was not an approved import from the Southern Trinity,” Rimi continued. “Chancellor Shu, I also heard that your decision to push the fruit as an import led to wushuiping becoming popular in Konkoku. Could it be that you decided to import it because you enjoy wushuiping?”

“What sort of official would decide what to import based on their own tastes? Besides, I already told you. I’ve never tried the stuff,” Kojin spat, apparently finding her question idiotic.

To Rimi, his words were a lifeline.

He still hasn’t noticed.

She decided to pull on that lifeline by pressing the chancellor.

“Then tell me, Chancellor Shu: why did you decide to import dragonflower fruit?”

“I received some wushuiping as a gift, and it turned out to be popular with women and children. If it’s popular with women and children, then that means more than half the population will want it. That’s what I based my decision on,” Kojin explained.

“You mean that you decided to do it because Master Shusei liked it.”

Kojin stared fiercely at Rimi.

“No, I didn’t do it for Shusei. I decided to import it because *all* children like it. Do you really think I’d do anything for *his* sake?”

“I don’t,” Rimi said immediately. “But I think it’s possible you just haven’t realized it yet. If you’ve never had wushuiping, perhaps you just don’t know. There are things in this world that a person like me knows that even the wise chancellor of Konkoku doesn’t. If you’d like to know, then just try a bite of it.”

Anyone with a keen mind had a desire for knowledge. He wouldn’t be able to bear remaining in the dark.

Just one bite. That's all I need.

Mrs. Yo and Shusei both seemed confused by what Rimi was saying. They remained silent and let the situation unfold.

As long as Chancellor Shu is aware of a certain fact, it'll only take a single bite for him to understand everything.

She hoped he knew. No, she was certain he knew.

"Of course, I'm already aware of it," Rimi continued, silently praying as she spoke. "Anyone who's had even a bite of wushuiping knows. Take one bite, and you'll realize it."

The former chancellor had been staring at the treats, and eventually, he could hold out no longer. He reached for one of the pastries, broke off a quarter, and ate it.

Immediately, he frowned.

"The scent of dragonflower fruit is so strong. I'd assumed it would be weaker or disappear entirely when you put it in wushuiping. But it hasn't disappeared at all," Kojin observed.

"Exactly. Wushuiping has a powerful scent of dragonflower fruit."

"You might as well be eating dragonflower fruit," Kojin said in annoyance. He glared at Shusei. "I thought you hated this smell."

The moment he said that, happiness welled in Rimi's breast.

Aha! He knew!

She'd caught the end of the lifeline. She was sure of it now.

"If wushuiping smells this strongly, then why did you go around talking about how much you liked it?" the former chancellor asked. "You hate the smell of it, Shusei. Were you lying? You've been fooling me since you were a child?"

Shusei gave a cold smile.

"Yes, I suppose you could call it a lie. I hate the smell of dragonflower fruit, and I hate the smell of wushuiping."

"So you're a born liar. You expect me to serve someone like that?!"

“You still haven’t realized!” Rimi snapped, recognizing that this was her moment.

Kojin seemed startled by that and reflexively jumped to his feet.

“What haven’t I realized?! Are you mocking me for not seeing he was always a repulsive little liar?!”

“Why did you realize it?”

“What on earth are you talking about? You just said I *didn’t* realize.”

“Chancellor Shu, the moment you took a bite of wushuiping, you realized something. What you haven’t realized is why you realized that. What made you realize that Master Shusei was lying?”

“Because he hates the smell of this stuff, but he always said it was delicious. Of course I’d realize it was a lie.”

“And why did you know Master Shusei hates the smell of dragonflower fruit?”

“I shared a home with the boy for more than fifteen years, so I’d obviously know that! What exactly are you getting at? What is this idiotic conversation even about? Are you just stalling for time?”

“It doesn’t matter if you shared a home! Knowing someone’s tastes isn’t an obvious matter! It’s not something people usually talk about. Not to mention, dragonflower fruit isn’t something that someone would eat regularly. I can’t imagine it came up in conversation often,” Rimi said. She could tell that Kojin was about to shut the conversation down, so she started to become more forceful.

“I don’t care if you lived together, you would never have noticed what foods he enjoyed and what foods he didn’t finish if you didn’t actually care,” the consort continued. “If you didn’t feel a shred of love or care for him, there’s no way you’d have known what he does and doesn’t like! In fact, I heard that His Majesty’s own mother never noticed the specifics of what he ate, and they lived in the same palace together. If you really don’t care about him, then how would you know something so specific?!”

The question seemed to make Kojin flinch.

“Tell me, how did you know?” Rimi pressed.

“Because I saw him pretend to eat some dragonflower fruit when we were visiting a colleague,” he responded.

“And you noticed that? In the middle of your conversation? Even though your colleague didn’t notice? Why is that?”

“I just noticed! That’s all!” Kojin said. He was starting to raise his voice as if he was feeling cornered.

“Even though the man you were talking to didn’t notice? Why did you notice and not him? Tell me the reason!”

“Because he wasn’t paying attention to him! Who would pay that kind of attention to someone else’s child?!”

“Exactly,” Rimi said with a smile. “It is a parent’s nature to notice things about their children that others miss. You claimed you never cared about Master Shusei, but the truth is that you looked after him and cared for him as a father.”

Shusei was dumbfounded as he stared at Kojin.

The former chancellor’s face went pale.



Kojin was stunned as the facts were laid before him.

That’s absolutely ridiculous...

...is what he wanted to say, but the words wouldn’t come out. It was such a sudden remark, Kojin wasn’t sure where to begin.

I suppose I did know that Shusei hated the smell of dragonflower fruit.

Kojin didn’t really know his own adoptive father’s tastes, and he’d lived with the man in Koto for over a decade. It had simply never come up. He couldn’t say what his father had liked or disliked.

Why would I know something like that?! Why?!

He felt like his vision was warping.

This again? I’m feeling dizzy.

A wave of vertigo, much like the one he'd felt at Renka's, assaulted the former chancellor while the past replayed in his mind.

He'd been invited to a colleague's estate. When Kojin arrived with Mrs. Yo and Shusei, dragonflower fruit had been set out for them. Shusei seemed strangely fidgety. He was usually very calm, so while he might have seemed like a well-behaved child to others, Kojin had noticed the boy was acting unusually.

The fruit was still a rarity at the time, and Kojin's business partner had seemed proud to have it. The man had insisted Shusei try it since it was supposed to be popular with children. Shusei had pretended to eat it, but he slipped the nibbled fruit to his mother under the table. When Mrs. Yo realized what he was doing, she casually wrapped it up and hid it in her pocket.

Shusei had managed to hand it off without ever looking down. Kojin had noticed, but all he'd thought was that Shusei was a polite boy. He hadn't thought of praising him for it, though. The boy was every bit Seishu's son. If Kojin had pampered him and let him run free, he would've just flown off like Seishu. Who knew what trouble that would bring?

No, the boy would be kept on a short leash. Kojin would raise Shusei to be his bureaucratic puppet, operating his hands and feet as if they were his own. There would be no escaping his control. It was a fitting revenge for Seishu's abandonment of the throne and Kojin's dreams.

So, Kojin decided that he would use Shusei as a living, thinking tool. The ex-chancellor claimed him as his biological son, figuring it would give him a tighter grip on the boy. Seishu might have betrayed Kojin's dreams, but Kojin had found his own form of retaliation.

Adopting Shusei was never an act of love. Kojin never intended to show the boy a shred of affection. He didn't even think he was capable of it.

But Shusei had turned out to be a clever, diligent child. He understood that Mrs. Yo was to be his new mother and received her tutoring shyly but earnestly. Even when Kojin demanded he learn complex subjects, the boy handled them easily. He tackled difficult concepts with zeal. And when he succeeded, he would look back at his adoptive father with a twinkle in his eyes. It was clear from the look that the boy wanted to be praised, but Kojin only ever gave him a

nod.

Shusei was nine when he first took the placement exams. He wasn't allowed to actually be made a bureaucrat due to his age, but the Minister of Personnel at the time had jokingly suggested he give it a try.

The boy received the third highest score of all applicants that year. He was so delighted when the news came that he wouldn't stop clinging to Kojin's shenyi.

"Look! Look! It's a letter from the Minister of Personnel! He says I got third!"

Kojin had never seen Shusei's eyes brimming with such sparkling joy like that. It was the first time he'd hugged his father as well. When Kojin saw the boy jumping for joy, he felt some emotion rising in his chest.

Third place? At his age? The boy might actually be a genius!

He almost hugged Shusei. But when he realized what he was about to do, anger surged in Kojin's breast.

"Don't get so full of yourself. You are nothing but a living, thinking tool," he'd said, shoving the boy away. He'd turned away then so he wouldn't have to see Shusei's smile freeze.

And now Shusei was right in front of him, looking at the former chancellor's shaken expression in shock. He resembled Seishu of course, but at that moment, he looked just like his younger self. The look in his eyes was just like old times.

Kojin squeezed his eyes tight as the vertigo grew stronger.

It hurts.

The thoughts he'd felt as he turned his back on Shusei came back to him, vivid as ever.

The poor boy. What? No, come now. A tool doesn't deserve your pity. But it's cute to see how happy he is. No, stop it. What kind of fool am I for thinking this nonsense? Remember why you took him in. It's just a tool. Seishu's child. Though he's not Seishu. He's Shusei. He's his own person. No, no. He has Seishu's blood. He might as well be Seishu himself.

Kojin hadn't realized how conflicted he'd felt at the time. There was some

sort of feeling in his breast, but he'd turned his attention away so he wouldn't have to face it.

Seishu had abandoned Kojin's dream, so Kojin would use Shusei as a tool.

That was the plan.

But Shusei had been so diligent and clever and darling...

A love he'd never wanted had been boiling up inside of him. It was painful, and Kojin shouldn't have felt it in the first place, so he had pushed it away.

Kojin felt weak. Unable to remain standing, he slumped down onto a sofa against the wall.

"I... Shusei, he..."

As chancellor, he had to find *something* to tell the impudent girl. But when he opened his mouth, he couldn't find the words. Everything he said sounded weak. A side of himself that he never wanted anyone to see was being exposed to the world. A side of himself that he didn't even recognize and desperately wanted to ignore.

"You said you liked wushuiping. Why did you lie?" he weakly asked Shusei, who was staring at Kojin.

"It was technically a lie, but then again, it wasn't. I do hate the smell of dragonflower fruit and wushuiping. But yes, I liked it. The smell was unpleasant, but I still ate plenty of the stuff," Shusei explained.

"You liked it despite the smell, didn't you?" Mrs. Yo observed, and Shusei nodded in response.

He hated the smell, yet there was still something he liked about wushuiping.

"It was the first treat my father had ever given me, after all," Shusei confessed.

Kojin suddenly became intensely aware of the powerful floral scent. It felt like the smell was spreading through his entire body. For some reason, a pained groan slipped from his mouth.

Shusei.

To think the boy had yearned for his father's love since he was a child.

Suddenly, everyone was looking at Kojin with bewildered expressions.

What's going on?

Just then, he noticed the droplets of water falling on his lap.

What...? It can't be.

He touched his chin to see what it was. Sure enough, tears were rolling down his cheeks, collecting on his chin, and dropping onto his lap.

"Why?" he whispered.

In that instant, Shusei's face seemed to shift. First to his childhood face, then to Seishu's.

All the emotions that had been held separate from Kojin's memories were suddenly unleashed, returning to mingle with his thoughts.

Suddenly, he heard a voice.

"You're amazing at togi. What's your name?"

III

Kojin could see Seishu's smiling face right in front of him.

The students that had gathered under Master Yo all came from important families. Kojin, the adopted child of a regional bureaucrat, was out of place among them. On his first day, he'd been mocked for not being able to play a single musical instrument.

He'd expected whoever he ended up rooming with to be awful as well, but figured he'd just have to put up with them.

Kojin had been sorting his belongings in his new room when a young man came in with a bright expression and a cheerful attitude. It seemed as if he'd never known hardship.

"Well, well. So you're my roommate, eh?" the man had said with a sudden, honest smile. "I saw you playing togi in the garden before. You made some

brilliant moves. It was incredible! You're amazing at togi. What's your name?"

Kojin was stunned to receive an unexpected compliment from someone before he'd even known the man's name.

But that was how Ho Seishu was.

Seishu was the trueborn heir of the Ho House and was a favored contender for the throne. He was also brilliant enough to be taken in as one of Master Yo's students. His was a charmed life, but Kojin's station was so far from his roommate's that there wasn't even a point in feeling jealous.

Besides that, it was almost impossible to dislike Seishu.

The man was clever, bighearted, and never showed a hint of anger. He wasn't haughty about being from an important family and never used his impressive intellect to talk down to anyone. He was kind to the weak and cared for the poor.

With all that in mind, no one was surprised that Yo Eika, Master Yo's daughter, was enamored with him. Kojin was secretly in love with her, but he had given up hope, knowing he didn't stand a chance against Seishu.

Although that didn't make it any less painful to see Eika blush when she looked at Seishu. He couldn't count the number of times he'd had to look down at his feet to avoid the sight. One day, he'd seen a white flower blooming there. He felt like his heart was being crushed by its pure, lovely whiteness.

Seishu had befriended Renka, who'd become a student at eleven years old, and had treated her as a peer. He'd invite her to sneak into their room and eat shiguo while they all debated. It was during those debates that they came to discuss their dreams. Kojin and Renka had both pushed Seishu to take the throne. They wanted him to abandon his studies and speak with the emperor about abdicating. The emperor at the time was ancient, and there were rumors he was eager to find a successor and step down.

But Seishu had seemed reluctant, claiming he didn't really want to be emperor that badly.

"Don't be an idiot," Kojin and Renka had both said, only half-jokingly.

When Seishu had introduced the Shokukokuan princess to them, Renka had looked somewhat downcast. She must've been able to see the future in Seishu's eyes. But Renka was still gracious. Perhaps she'd simply accepted things as they were.

But Kojin couldn't do that. When faced with something unpleasant, he believed one had to find some way to change the course of events. He knew that Seishu was no womanizer and was probably intent on marrying the girl for life.

The problem was that, if Seishu married someone with ties to Shokukoku, the Ho House and any bureaucrats loyal to them would never support Seishu's bid for the throne. In the end, all of Seishu's supporters were opposed to the relationship. The Ho House was opposed as well. And of course, Kojin also couldn't approve of it.

One night in their cramped, candlelit room, they had a serious discussion. The rooms Master Yo had given them were so small that when they sat on their beds across from each other, their knees touched.

"Seishu, you need to give up on her. If you don't, nobody will support the idea of putting you on the throne," Kojin had tried explaining to him.

"The throne just doesn't hold that kind of appeal for me," Seishu had stubbornly insisted. *"I'd rather live my life with the woman I love. I don't care if I have to live a poor life in the country and work every day to survive. I'd still be happier doing that,"* Seishu had said.

"Those are your values, and I won't try to deny you that. But if you don't take the throne, that dolt of a prince will. I don't want to serve a man like him. If it was you, I feel like there'd be a point in serving," Kojin had argued.

"But I just can't find any value in it. I care about smaller things."

"You're brilliant and in a position to use that intelligence. Sometimes it seems like you've been blessed by heaven. You're really going to throw all of that away?"

"I think you're a far greater man than me, Kojin. Maybe that's why it's harder

for you to find happiness.”

Kojin had gotten angry then. He'd felt like he was being mocked.

“All I want is to see you become emperor so I can serve you and bring stability to Konkoku. How long have I been saying that? You said you wanted that too. Wasn't that our dream?”

“My dream has changed.”

“So you're breaking your promise? What about my dreams?”

“I never promised anything. I said what I believed at the time. But I've met someone, fallen in love, and now my thinking has changed. Your dream is yours, not mine.”

Kojin's anger had begun to boil. With each passing moment, he'd felt more betrayed. It was like someone had replaced the Seishu he knew with someone completely different. Hatred for this impostor began to grow.

“Fine then. Throw it all away. Disappear with her and ignore your family's wishes so you can live together. I'll even help you,” Kojin had spat.

If Seishu wanted to live a poor, miserable existence, then let him abandon everything for love and end up unfulfilled and regretful. Possessed by such angry, bitter thoughts, Kojin helped Seishu escape and cover his tracks.

With his ties to Seishu cut, Kojin then approached the Ryu House's prince.

Since he was the one who helped Seishu escape, Kojin was the only one who'd known where his old friend had gone. He would visit them sometimes just to make sure they were still poor and busy toiling to support their new child. Internally, he was laughing at them. He was happy to see them living lives like that.

But Seishu had seemed happy and fulfilled.

“Look who's here! The man I have to thank for all of this,” Seishu would say with guileless joy. He had no idea that Kojin was there to silently mock him.

Which was why, when Seishu fell ill, he asked Kojin to look after his wife and Shusei. And so he did. When Seishu passed, Kojin gave them just enough support to keep them alive without ever letting them truly live. But Seishu's

wife had simply been grateful for it. Kojin had thought her a fool. If she hadn't tied herself to Seishu and had instead married some wealthy merchant or farmer, she would've lived an easier life.

The woman had always had a weak constitution, and when faced with the trauma of her husband's death and the toll of her future days, her health declined further, and it became apparent she wouldn't have long to live. When she'd realized that, she had entrusted Shusei to Kojin.

I hated Seishu for abandoning my dreams.

Kojin's hate had made him laugh at Seishu whenever he involved himself in the man's life. Yet while he looked down on the family Seishu had left behind even as he supported them, his amusement was mixed with pity.

He had hated Seishu with every fiber of his being. Or so he had thought.

Like with Shusei, maybe Kojin harbored more feelings than just hate toward Seishu. The former chancellor understood that now.

Though Kojin mocked Seishu all the while, in the end, he'd helped the man accomplish all his dreams. He'd helped Seishu disappear with his beloved, and when his old friend had passed on, he'd helped care for Seishu's wife and child. Kojin had even taken the boy in and raised him to be a fine bureaucrat. It had all gone exactly how it was supposed to.

Kojin had been unable to destroy Seishu. He'd been unable to drive him into despair. All he'd managed to do was harbor his own miserable feelings while giving Seishu everything he'd wanted.

I hated him. I hated him so much... But at the same time, I loved him.

Seishu, with his rough hands and shoddy clothes, had such a carefree smile whenever he saw Kojin.

"Kojin! I'm so glad to see you!"

And when faced with such a smile, Kojin couldn't help but reflexively feel some sense of joy.

One feeling after another, once hidden deep within his heart, emerged to

assault Kojin. He was consumed by a wave of confusing emotions, from humiliation to sadness to regret.

The tears wouldn't stop. Kojin was confused, unsure why he was crying or how to stop the tears. While he was lost in this dizzying, overwhelming tide, Mrs. Yo stood up and came to stand before her husband.

"You've been such a fool, my dear. Do you finally understand?" she asked.

Her words were sharp, but her tone was gentle. Perhaps that's why he didn't become angry.

"You have been using your obsession with your dreams and other people to chain and torment yourself. You've let yourself suffer because of your rigid stubbornness. That's how you've been ever since your student days," Mrs. Yo continued, using her gentle voice, which was somehow soothing in spite of her condemnations.

"But I chose you *because* you suffer from your hard-headed foolishness. I chose to become your wife," she said, kneeling before her husband and laying her hand on his lap. "I was enamored with Master Seishu, of course. He had captured your and Renka's hearts, so of course, he captured mine as well. But I didn't want to marry him simply because of my own attraction to him. It felt childish and flighty. The type of person I loved was someone conflicted and in pain. A person who was searching for someone. Like you. When I realized that's what I wanted, I decided I would be your wife."



The hand in his lap was so warm.

Eika always knew what a fool I was.

But still, why had she chosen to grant him that warmth? He supposed her warmth was a message that it was okay for him to be a fool.

Kojin's rational mind rejected the idea. He didn't suffer fools. Yet she gave him her warmth all the same, and as if his walls had crumbled, that warmth crept its way inside him. It began to untangle all the things that had wrapped themselves around his heart, binding and constricting it. All that was left was something simple.

Shusei was such a sweet boy.

And Kojin had hurt that sweet boy again and again. The thought made the former chancellor want to see himself suffer. When he looked at Shusei, he wished for nothing but pain on himself.

I wondered why you came here before me as master of the Ho House...but I see all too clearly now.

Shusei must have hated his father. How sad that he had made his son feel like that.

He had probably joined the Ho House because of his hate, hoping to make Kojin suffer. It was the chancellor's fault that his usually loyal son had done all those things to Shohi. Kojin was the reason that Shusei had become an enemy of the throne.

It must have hurt to be made to do things so unlike you, Shusei.

Shusei was gentle, clever, earnest, and diligent. Yet Kojin's existence had pushed such a man into the Ho House.

I have to make this right.

Perhaps if Kojin atoned, he could sort out the twisted circumstances that had beset them.

I have to atone. For my son.



Mrs. Yo had always known how much Kojin adored his son. The brutal discipline and education had been to prepare Shusei for the future. The former chancellor had always seemed cold as he watched his son try to meet his unforgiving demands.

But Kojin was always thinking of Shusei. When Mrs. Yo had heard he'd recommended Shusei spend time with the prince, she'd been opposed to it. Shusei was a gentle child, and she worried he wouldn't be able to handle the prince, who was rumored to be a selfish brute. But Kojin had outright rejected her concerns.

"He's tough, deep down. The boy's not some weakling who can't handle a selfish child."

And he was right. But he would never have been able to make that decision without knowing his son. He also seemed to know that Shusei liked wushu and hated dragonfruit. Since he believed himself indifferent to his son, he didn't even seem to realize he knew him.

But he's finally figured it out.

Within Mrs. Yo's heart, a tension she'd been carrying for decades began to melt away.

When Kojin had first come to the Yo estate, Mrs. Yo had thought him to be an inflexible, humorless, and unpleasant man. But when she realized that he was completely devoted to becoming a bureaucrat in order to protect his country, she began to see how earnest he was. And when she saw his shy smile while speaking to Seishu or the awkward, despondent way he'd speak to her, clearly so unfamiliar with women, she began to find him cute.

She had been enamored with Seishu and had been sad when he'd disappeared. But when she realized he was living his life on his own terms, she felt better. More than anything, she felt sad that Kojin had stopped smiling.

She had wanted Seishu to return, but that was because she wanted to see Kojin smile again. She wanted to see his distorted and conflicted emotions heal.

For twenty years, their life had passed with those wishes unfulfilled. She'd begun to believe he would never heal.

But various circumstances had created a perfect storm. Shusei had turned on his father, Kojin had disobeyed the emperor and left the palace, and Setsu Rimi had appeared to speak with him. Without any one of those pieces, nothing might have changed.

Finally.



Outside the room, Jotetsu was leaning beside the door with arms crossed as he looked up at the sky.

Kojin was calm and ruthless. He approached all his decisions with calm rationality. He was perfectly suited to the role of chancellor, but he was exactly the kind of man that Jotetsu hated.

When they'd pointed out Kojin's love for his son, who he'd always treated cruelly, the man had fallen apart. But Jotetsu didn't hate him for it. He'd never once seen the former chancellor as a father, but for the first time in his life, he started to feel a little affection for the man.

"So the mask's finally been pulled away, eh, Dad?"

A clamor suddenly arose at the gate. Jotetsu pulled away from the wall and headed through the garden. He could see Shoyo running toward him in a panic.

Chapter 7: The War Cry of Rebellion

I

Shusei was too shocked to think.

He considered me his son? That can't be.

If that was true, he had a miserable, messy way of showing it.

The misery and quiet vindictiveness that had dwelled in Shusei's breast began to swirl, looking for some way out as if the sudden events had displaced them.

He was angry at the absurdity of it. Shocked by the suddenness of it. Some childish part of him felt so happy and wanted to accept it without question.

Never once had he been told he'd done well or that he was a good boy. It had made the emptiness swell inside of him. But now, it was like a window had opened into his heart and soft sunlight was beaming in.

The sweet scent of flowers suddenly seemed to grow stronger.

Dragonflower fruit.

The shock of Kojin's emotional turmoil was so great, it was still hard to accept it as reality, but it was like the fruit's scent was insisting it was true. He looked down at the wushuiping laying on the white plate. They brought back vivid memories of the day Kojin had given him some.

The only things his father had ever given him were books, but one day, Kojin had returned home with a package full of wushuiping and told him he'd received them from a Southern Trinity ambassador.

"They're supposed to be sweet. You can eat them," Kojin had said curtly before heading into the estate.

"I can?! You're giving these to me?! I can really eat them?!" Shusei had shouted, chasing after his father.

“They’re sweets. What else would you do with them?! Are you a fool?” Kojin had snapped, turning around at the sound of his son’s shouting.

It was a harsh thing to say, but Shusei had seen something resembling a smile in the corners of Kojin’s mouth. He thought it was impossible, but even if that little smile was just in his imagination, it had made Shusei ecstatic.

But the moment he’d taken a bite, his expression soured.

The sickly sweet floral scent was so powerful, it was like having a garden of flowers blooming in one’s mouth. The aftertaste was brutal as well.

Still, Shusei was happy to be eating it. The smell of flowers made him wince, but each bite made him feel blessed.

He’d eaten so much of the stuff that Mrs. Yo had lectured him about it. Kojin had seemed appalled, but the next day, he’d asked if Shusei liked the pastries. Shusei had declared without hesitation that he’d loved them. For days after that, he felt light on his feet and focused on his studies.

He’d been confused at the time. Why would he love and desire a treat he should’ve hated? Why did he feel so cheerful for days after eating it?

As he poked and prodded at those strange thoughts, he began to realize how interesting food was. Eating things could affect the mood. It could alter the state of the body. Eating seemed to be a far more fascinating and important act than he’d ever realized. Perhaps it was worth exploring.

That was why Shusei had begun his studies into food. The more he pursued it, the more interested he became. It led to his study of cuisinology.

He knew I hated dragonflower fruit. I never knew that he knew.

Shusei had always thought Kojin was indifferent to him. He’d believed his father knew nothing of what he liked or disliked, how he felt, or the highs and lows of his mood.

But he did know.

Kojin was always cold. He criticized harshly. He called his son a fool. Shusei had always believed the man hated him. But Shusei had still strove to succeed in his studies and held some deep, hidden respect for his father. Maybe it was

because his childhood self could sense his father's faint, confusing affection.

The former chancellor often stood behind Shusei to watch as he struggled with difficult subjects. Kojin's expression never shifted when Shusei would turn and give him the answer to a question. But while Shusei persevered through his studies, his father was always behind him. Maybe, on some level, he had realized his young self was being watched over.

I thought he hated me, but maybe somewhere, deep down, I knew he loved me. That's why it was so shocking when I found out I was really a Ho. It made me fear I was never actually loved.

Shusei's feelings hadn't changed much since childhood. He wanted to be praised. To be loved. Those desires had always been there.

He didn't know how to handle all of these things being thrust in front of him.

Oh, Rimi. You seem to love making things difficult for me.

After watching Kojin for a while, Shusei unconsciously stood up. He took a few steps toward his father but suddenly faltered and stopped in place.

The former chancellor looked at his son with an almost dispassionate expression. He had no kind smile to give. It was the same expression he'd always given him, but that was what had struck Shusei. This was exactly how he'd always looked at his son.

Kojin was awkward. Many things were going on under that blank look, perhaps even love for his son. But he had no idea how to show it. Perhaps he didn't even recognize it himself.

Maybe if Shusei had been more aware and adept, he'd have been better able to unravel the issues binding Kojin's heart. But Shusei was just as clumsy as his father in that respect.

Suddenly, some of the things that Renka had said came to mind.

"You look just like Seishu, but your whole attitude is different."

"You aren't Seishu."

Perhaps Renka had wanted to see a glimpse of Seishu in Shusei. But she hadn't been able to find any resemblance between them. In fact, he had

probably reminded her more of Kojin than Seishu.

In the end, I was never a Ho. I'm Kojin's son.



Tears...

Despite it seeming like Kojin had lost the ability to even smile, tears were flowing from his eyes. The sight shocked Rimi, but it also gave her such a sense of relief that she thought her knees would give out.

Shusei looked dumbfounded. He'd been presented with something so unbelievable, it appeared as if he'd simply stopped thinking.

Wushuiping's name comes from its ability to induce sleep and awaken someone.

There was power in a name. Rimi had no way of knowing how wushuiping had earned its name, but whatever the case, it had a fitting power.

Shusei loved wushuiping despite hating the smell. Kojin loved his son while denying those feelings. Both of them carried conflicting feelings, which the pastry had exposed.

Kojin silently watched his son. The former chancellor had only realized his own feelings as they were bared for everyone to see. So he now waited, trembling, to see how Shusei would respond.

Mrs. Yo looked worriedly at her husband while Shusei stood silently, seemingly frozen in place.

The silence went on for a long while before Kojin finally broke it.

"I suppose I have to give you an answer," he said calmly, seemingly thinking more deeply than ever before. "My feelings toward you are much like my feelings for Seishu. I hated your father for choosing the woman he loved over becoming emperor. But I could never hate him completely. I took you in so I could raise you as my puppet. I wanted to control you in order to take revenge on him for betraying me. But you were so much more diligent and earnest than I expected. At a certain point, raising you didn't feel like an act of revenge anymore. It made me angry at myself, and in some twisted way, I ended up

directing that anger toward you.”

Shusei’s eyes widened. He seemed unsure how to cope with such a candid expression of Kojin’s feelings. But he stayed frozen in place, unable to pull his eyes away from his father.

“I’m sure you hate me. It would be only natural,” the former chancellor continued. “I’d surmised that you joined the Ho House largely out of a desire for revenge. And if it would satisfy your hunger, then I suppose it would be best if I came to serve you. It would be my atonement. But...”

Kojin trailed off then. His expression tightened, and he sighed softly, as if talking had worn him out. He brushed Mrs. Yo’s hand from his lap and stood. He faced Shusei with his back straight.

“But atonement or not, I cannot change my beliefs. I want peace and stability for this land. That is the one thing I can’t back down from. And if letting the Ho loyalists put you on the throne would bring peace and stability to Konkoku, then I would happily give in to your desire for revenge,” Kojin explained. “But replacing the ruling family would bring monumental chaos to this country. It would take years for the palace to become stable again. Or, if things went poorly, it could be decades. I cannot be a party to that.”

“So, you’re saying,” Shusei began, finally managing to speak, “that you’re refusing my offer.”

Kojin nodded gravely. In his nod was an assertion: he would never change his mind.

“Instead, I will officially resign as chancellor. If you have become master of the Ho House as a form of revenge against me, then I will retire from politics, disappear from your sight, and never do anything to get in your way again,” Kojin announced. “I’ll spend the rest of my days here in Koto. That way, you can return to His Majesty’s side. I won’t kill myself for you, but I’ll make myself so insignificant that I might as well not exist to you. Will that satisfy you? I don’t believe you truly want to be Lord Ho. If I can resolve your desire for revenge, then I don’t think there’d be any point in you staying in that role.”

Shusei gently squeezed his eyes shut as if trying to calm himself. After a moment, he opened them again.

“A desire for revenge... Yes, I certainly do feel that,” the scholar said calmly with a blank expression. “I believed you were my father. I spent my childhood wanting you to tell me I was good or that you loved me. I worked desperately for it. All I wanted was for you to love me. And when I realized that would never happen, I wanted revenge. You and I have different circumstances and ways of doing things. But strangely enough, we both want the same thing. It may break my heart that you don’t love me, and I may oppose you, but you raised me. In the end, I value the same things you do.”

Shusei’s gaze shifted to the sea beyond the handrail outside the room.

“My birth father ignored the emperorship with no thought about how it would affect the country. It seems I’m more like my foster father in that regard.”

“Then will you?” Kojin asked. He took a hopeful step forward, but Shusei still seemed torn and backed away. “Will you, Shusei?”

“I—”

“Chancellor, you have a guest,” Jotetsu interrupted. He was standing in the doorway with a nervous look.

“A guest?” the former chancellor asked, frowning.

“Forgive me, Kojin. I let myself in.”

A slim man in black clothes and a black cloak pushed past Jotetsu.

“Ah—!” Rimi cried, stifling her shriek by placing both hands over her mouth.

Both Kojin and Shusei were petrified with shock.

“Your Majesty...” Rimi uttered from beneath her hands.

Mrs. Yo, who had apparently been wondering who the guest was, gasped.

The man pulled down his cloak to reveal his face. It was the fifth emperor of Konkoku, Ryu Shohi.

II

Rimi’s mind was spinning. She had no idea why Shohi had appeared there.

Adding to her confusion, Renka was with the emperor as well. She was dressed in her usual crimson shenyi but was wearing a cloak as well. The vice minister lacked her usual laid-back demeanor. Instead, there was a sharpness in her eyes, as if she refused to miss a single bit of what was about to unfold.

“Your Majesty?!” Mrs. Yo said, staring dumbfounded at Shohi. She reflexively went to bow, but the emperor gave a small wave of his hand.

“There’s no need to bow. I’m the one intruding here,” he said as he entered the room.

Rimi was overwhelmed.

Your Majesty?! Why?! What are you doing here?!

Mrs. Yo seemed shocked and panicked, but true to form, she managed to stifle her shock. The noblewoman moved to the side of the room, kneeled, and bowed her head.

“Your Majesty, what are you doing here?” Rimi asked, half in a daze as Shohi approached.

“Forgive me, Rimi. I’ve tasked you with the impossible. That’s why I’m here. With a problem like this, I should’ve just come in the first place,” he said.

Shusei retreated a few steps to remove himself from Shohi’s path. The emperor’s appearance had seemingly shocked Shusei as well, and the scholar suddenly seemed unsure of what he should do or how he should act.

Shohi flicked a glance at him and slightly smirked. Shusei blinked several times in response and gave an uncertain look.

“Jotetsu informed me a few moments ago why Shusei is here and what’s happened. That makes things a bit awkward, but I’m afraid I’m in too much of a hurry to worry about that. We ran multiple horses to exhaustion to get here, and I need to return to the palace as soon as I can.”

“But that’s so reckless. How could you do such a thing?” Rimi asked. She recalled how long the journey was from Annei to Koto. A nonstop journey of that length would be brutal.

“I came here without telling Rihan, Keiyu, Hakurei, or anyone else. I knew if I

sought their approval, they would never say yes. I'm sure they got quite upset when they learned the truth. I need to get back soon," Shohi responded.

Everyone present seemed shocked and appalled that the emperor would do something so reckless.

"And as for why His Majesty chose to personally come and drag me into this, he's yet to tell me," Renka said with a strained smile.

"As I told you, you'll understand in time," Shohi said.

"Yes, you did say that. Repeatedly," Renka said with a smirk.

The emperor came to stand before Kojin and stared him in the eyes.

"May I ask what brings you to me, Your Majesty?" Kojin asked without offering any sort of bow. "It is outrageous for the emperor to leave the palace and ride off to a port city without telling any of his retainers. Whatever your reasoning or intention, it is unacceptable. Do you not realize the importance of your role as emperor?"

Shohi placidly accepted the harsh rebuke.

"I know well that what I've done should not be done. If anything should happen to me, it would alter the fate of everyone surrounding me. It would alter the fate of the country itself. Hakurei lectured me too, and I agreed with his points. But I believe that exceptions exist," Shohi acknowledged. "As emperor, I believe I must carry out some things myself if they are of personal importance to me, or if it only makes sense for me to do them."

The sun was high in the sky, and the light reflecting off the water was getting stronger. The sea breeze rushed endlessly through the room, making Shohi's cloak flutter in the wind.

"I doubted you, and that earned your anger. I want to apologize for that. I would like for you to return to the palace as well. I'm here today because I wanted to say that personally," Shohi announced. "I tasked Setsu Rimi with that, but I see all too well now that the only way to prove my sincerity was to come and see you personally."

"I am sure you have seen by now how I prefer to do things, so you should also

know that I have no intention of serving the throne,” Kojin said. “All I care about is bringing peace and development to Konkoku. I am the type of person who will enact any means necessary to do that, including acting immediately without your approval. I even considered eliminating your favorite concubine.”

“I’m fine with that. I don’t need you to serve me. If you care about nothing but peace and prosperity for our land, then I could ask for no better chancellor,” Shohi responded without hesitation. The answer clearly took Kojin by surprise.

“If you decide you’d like someone removed, then I simply hope you’ll talk to me about it in advance,” Shohi continued. “I can use my authority as emperor to have them exiled or stripped of their station. That way we can resolve things without killing. If you have some plan you’d like to enact, I don’t care if you want to move before telling me. I’d just like to be informed eventually. Or failing that, even a simple report just to put us on equal ground will do. Perhaps you’d be happier if I was some great man, but I can be nothing more than what I am. That is exactly why I need a chancellor. I need you.”

With that, the emperor kneeled and bowed his head.



“Your Majesty!” Jotetsu barked, but Shohi kept his head hung.

I can't believe this!

For an emperor to kneel to a retainer was unthinkable. It simply wasn't done.

Shusei and Renka both stiffened. Their eyes were wide. Kojin staggered several steps backward.

“Shu Kojin, I beseech you,” the emperor pleaded.

Shohi surely knew that this was unacceptable. Not to mention, he was a proud man who would never have imagined kneeling in front of others. He had to have been taught that he should choose death before kneeling. It was the nature of the emperorship.

But here he was, kneeling before his servant. Rimi's heart was moved by his resolve. She trembled, realizing just how rare it was to see the sight of his bowed head.

Even sending me as his messenger must have taken a lot of resolve. But he couldn't let himself leave it all to me. He must have been searching for something else he could do.

This was the answer he'd found.

“I can't believe this...” Kojin murmured. “I can't believe this! No emperor of Konkoku should ever personally visit his servant, and now *this?! You?! Why* would you do something like this?!”

“I already told you,” Shohi said, keeping his head hung in spite of the chancellor's rebuke. “I need you, and so I beseech you. Even if it costs me my pride.”

This time, Kojin was truly at a loss for words.

“I regret my lack of patience, and I need you to return. This is the best way of expressing both,” the emperor stated. He finally raised his head and fixed Kojin with a piercing gaze. “I do not have the popular support, the wisdom, or the heroic strength that would satisfy you. I didn't want to see that when I took the throne. But my servants have grabbed me by the collar and forced me to take a hard look at myself, and now I see what I am. If I have any talent at all, it's that I

know myself. And in knowing myself, I see that I can't do anything alone."

The wind made a mess of Shohi's hair, but his eyes remained unwavering.

"If the land is peaceful and prosperous and the people are happy, what does it matter if the emperor is a great hero or an impatient child? An emperor need only do one thing, and that is to know his own ability and govern accordingly. I will surround myself with good servants, hear their thoughts, and do what I can to help. That is how I can govern. Having good servants will make me a good emperor."

"This is everything I have. Is that enough?" he seemed to be saying.

"Renka told me she wouldn't become Minister of Personnel without my chancellor's approval. That's why I brought her here. If I have your approval, and you'll hear my request, then just tell me that you think she would be a fitting minister. If you do that, it will mean I have a chancellor and a Minister of Personnel."

Renka was taken aback.

So that's why he brought her.

Shohi had clearly grown tired of important people slipping through his fingers. He had brought Renka with him so he could resolve everything, here and now. But there was passion in his youthful haste.



Kojin felt a shock that bordered on awe.

Is this really Ryu Shohi, fifth emperor of Konkoku?

The Shohi he knew was an impatient, brutish, and thick-headed child. His father was an idiot and his mother was horribly cruel. Kojin wanted nothing more from him than to remain a figurehead who stayed out of the government's way.

But the youth kneeling before him now was sincere and deeply thoughtful. He overflowed with bold courage. Though his youth meant he lacked experience and knowledge, he seemed to recognize his shortcomings and was willing to sacrifice his pride to apologize and ask for help.

Kojin had known the emperor since he was a child, and he still viewed him as the child he'd once been. But this young man was someone else entirely.

When could he have changed so much?

But no, perhaps he hadn't changed at all. Maybe Kojin hadn't been able to see past the grit and garbage that had hardened around him. With all of that polished away, maybe the emperor's true face was finally peeking through.

Kojin had spent so long fooling himself, avoiding the contents of his own heart, that he may not have been able to see things changing around him.

The former chancellor felt like he was seeing Shohi for the first time after a long sleep.

Ryu Shohi, fifth emperor of Konkoku, doesn't have the makings of a great hero.

Kojin had known that from the very beginning. Seishu had been a hero in the making. He could charm everyone around, drawing them to him. That was the sort of man Kojin had wanted to serve.

And yet...

He may not be Seishu, but perhaps that's fine.

If Shohi's true nature was beginning to shine through, perhaps he could be polished even further. How might his youthful essence be made to shine even brighter? It would take patience, but how satisfying might it be to see him blossom?

He's begging me.

Unlike Seishu, who had abandoned Kojin's dream, Shohi was willing to beg, sacrificing all of his pride. The former chancellor's heart had begun to burn. Perhaps that was all he really needed.

Kojin slowly kneeled.



Kojin kneeled, bringing himself to eye level with Shohi. Rimi gasped at the sight, as did everyone else in the room.

“Your Majesty, you must not kneel. Never do this again,” Kojin said, taking the emperor’s hand and trying to pull him to his feet. But Shohi stubbornly refused to stand.

“I will not stand until I have your answer,” the emperor said.

“You have shown your sincerity, Your Majesty,” Kojin said after a moment of silence. “If my meager ability can be of service, then I will answer your call.”

Shohi’s tense expression finally loosened. The chancellor took the emperor’s hand and pulled him to his feet. He reverently released Shohi’s hand and gave a small nod. Kojin then turned his gaze to Renka.

“I believe that Ryo Renka, like me, has behaved disrespectfully to you, Your Majesty. But you still want her as your Minister of Personnel, correct?” Kojin asked.

“Of course. Just like you.”

“Then assuming I have not been dismissed from my position as chancellor, I believe she is a suitable candidate.”

Shohi looked from Kojin to Renka. The vice minister’s head was tilted slightly as if she was waiting for something. Something seemed to dawn on Shohi after a moment, and he looked to his chancellor. Kojin gave a nod.

“Ryo Renka,” Shohi said solemnly as he approached her, “will you take up the role of minister?”

Renka lazily brushed her hair back as she stared at the emperor. Her staring bordered on rudeness, but Shohi didn’t flinch, nor did he avert his gaze. There was no annoyance or anger in his eyes. He simply waited for a response.

“I’ve hated the idea of emperors ever since I was a girl,” Renka suddenly and confusingly announced. Mrs. Yo looked concerned, seemingly wondering what Renka might say next.

“And why do you hate it?” Shohi asked without reproach.

“My parents were honest, hardworking people. They were kind, maybe even too kind. They were ordinary and uneducated, but they were good people,” Renka recalled. “But famine took them. I ended up on the streets, and I can’t

tell you how many times I nearly lost my life. While I spent my days cold, starving, and running from slavers, I only wished for one thing: to live in a good, stable land where the hungry and familyless were cared for. I believed if the emperor was the one responsible for ruling the country, then he was the one responsible for good people dying too. I wanted to live in a rich, peaceful land, and I came to hate the emperor for not giving us that.”

Shohi’s gaze fell to his hands, seemingly unable to swallow the full truth of what he was hearing. It was the hateful voice of the common people to their emperor. He wore an expression of deep shame.

“I see. Of course you’d hate the throne, then,” Shohi said defeatedly.

So in the end, Lady Renka...

Renka truly had no interest in serving Shohi. It was like she was announcing that all over again.

“Does that make you angry?” the vice minister asked in a teasing, challenging tone. But Shohi shook his head.

“Why would I be angry when being faced with the truth?” he asked. “I might be irritated that I am ignorant and powerless... I suppose I am worthless.”

At that, Renka’s attitude quickly softened. Everyone, including Shohi, looked surprised at her change. Her expression was entirely different, as if she’d removed a mask. She now emanated wisdom.

“I told you before that I did not want to serve you, and you said that was fine. Now I told you that I hate the throne, and rather than grow angry or rebuke me, you asked me why. You even called yourself worthless. Emperor or not, I find myself faced with a very earnest young man. I simply can’t manage to hate someone like you,” Renka calmly stated. “For a long time now, I’ve had a single, unchanging wish. It’s the one thing I have in common with Kojin. If I become your retainer, I believe I could work toward a more peaceful and prosperous Konkoku.”

Suddenly, Renka kneeled before Shohi.

“I will undertake the role of Minister of Personnel.”

Shohi seemed so moved by her announcement of allegiance that he was speechless for a while. Rimi stared in shock at the sight of Renka kneeling. The vice minister was not the sort of woman to do anything straightforwardly, so an outright declaration like that felt as if she was saying she would do everything she could to serve the emperor.

“There is no need to kneel. Stand, Renka. I look forward to working with you,” Shohi said.

“I’ll do everything in my power to help,” Renka responded as she stood. She then turned to the chancellor. “It seems I’ll be in your hands as well, Kojin.”

But Kojin shook his head.

“I may still hold the position of chancellor, but I think my time has passed,” he said. “Your Majesty, I will do everything I can to serve you for as long as I am your chancellor. But I believe it is time for you to seek a fresher mind. If you need someone, it should not be me. It should be Shusei.”

III

Kojin’s gaze turned to his son, and Shohi’s followed. Upon hearing his name and becoming the center of attention, Shusei looked uncomfortable.

The chancellor returned his attention to Shohi and gave a firm nod, insisting upon his point.

“Take him on, Your Majesty. I believe that I am his reason for joining the Ho House. If I am gone, he should have no reason to remain there. Besides, I believe he’s far more suited to the position of chancellor than I am,” Kojin announced.

Nobody in the room breathed as they watched the events unfold before them. Renka seemed wary. Mrs. Yo seemed worried. Jotetsu seemed on guard. And Rimi’s heart was pounding out of her chest. She felt like she was choking on the anticipation.

We might be able to bring him back.

The cries of seabirds resounded in the distance. The crashing of waves

seemed deafening.

“I see. I do think that Shusei and I have things that need to be talked about,” Shohi agreed. He took several steps toward Shusei. “I’ve wanted to speak with you. Openly and honestly.”

“Your Majesty...” Shusei said, squeezing his eyes shut.

The scholar seemed to spend a long while thinking before finally opening his eyes again.

“Very well,” he continued quietly with a note of resolve in his voice. “If you insist, then I will tell you the whole story.”

Shusei’s gaze passed over everyone present before coming to land on the outside walkway overhanging the sea. The walkway ended in a staircase that traveled downward.

“I believe that walkway leads to a viewing platform overlooking the sea,” Shusei said. “We’d have nothing but the cliffs for company, and there wouldn’t be anywhere for a spy to listen in. Nobody would interrupt. I think it would be a good place for us to talk. Will you join me?”

Shohi nodded.

“Could I come too?!” Rimi pleaded. She wanted to know what Shusei had to say. The two men exchanged looks.

“I don’t mind,” the emperor said while Shusei nodded in reply.

“I’m coming too,” Jotetsu said with a grave look. “I’m not letting the emperor go off and talk with the master of the Ho House without a bodyguard present. I don’t care if Lord Ho wants me there or not, I’m coming.”

“By all means. Shall we then?” the scholar said calmly before heading for the door. Just as Shohi moved to follow, a small, white blur came darting down the walkway. It scurried to Rimi’s feet and climbed up her skirt to settle on her shoulder.

“Tama?!” Rimi cried.

The little dragon was supposed to be back in her room. She now sat looking back and forth between Shohi and Shusei with her blue eyes. Her usual sweet

demeanor had been replaced with a sort of tension.

Renka and Mrs. Yo looked quizzically at Tama. Shusei had frozen for a moment at her appearance, but he quickly collected himself and headed for the door once more. Shohi followed. Rimi and Jotetsu left the room as well. Out of the corner of her eye, the consort could see Kojin frown.

The cliffside walkway led to a winding staircase, which they descended.

“Tama? What is it?” Rimi asked, but Tama’s attention was fixed firmly on Shohi and Shusei as if something was wrong. She didn’t even raise her head to acknowledge Rimi’s question.

There is something wrong.

The stairs, which had been built along the cliffside, were inundated with the powerful sea winds. As they descended, the stairs eventually came to a huge stone outcropping halfway down the cliff with a red handrail at its edge. The handrail was built high, considering the drop-off that lay beyond it. That way, a careless slip wouldn’t result in the victim falling down the cliff.

Shohi approached the handrail and looked into the distance. Apparently, this was a new sight for him. He laid his hand on the rail, which reached his chest. His eyes sparkled in awe as he watched the sunlight glittering on the water’s surface.

Shusei quietly approached the emperor, taking the place beside him and looking out at the water as well. Rimi and Jotetsu stood off to the side and watched.

They’re here together.

The sight of them standing side by side was one she’d longed to see. Happiness swelled inside the consort’s breast.

I want him back.

Now that Shusei knew how Kojin felt, she wondered what his decision would be. At Renka’s estate, she had asked if he would return should the emptiness inside of him be banished. He hadn’t given her a response.

But he said he became master of the Ho House for His Majesty’s sake, which

means...

If Shohi made a heartfelt plea for the scholar to return, maybe he would abandon his reckless plan.

Tama hopped down from Rimi's shoulder, scurried over to and up the handrail, and sat atop it. She tilted her head as if listening to something intently.

Jotetsu was tense, ready to move in case anything happened. He had a keen eye on everyone present, like a beast eager to pounce and protect its master.

"It's been a long time since we've met like this outside of public ceremonies. We've barely been able to speak since you took up leadership of the Ho House," Shohi observed.

"Indeed. That's because neither of us desired it," Shusei replied softly.

After a moment of silence, the emperor turned his gaze from the sea to Shusei.

"Kojin said that he was the main reason you joined the Ho House. Is that true?" Shohi asked.

"Yes. Well, he was half the reason," Shusei clarified, continuing to look out at the water.

"Half?"

"Indeed. Half. And now...I won't say it's resolved exactly. I haven't come to terms with things yet. I still feel a bit confused. But...my heart is certainly lighter."

"If he's half the reason, then what's the other half?" Shohi insisted with a curious look.

Shusei gave no response.

"Tell me, Shusei."

But he remained silent. He continued looking at the sea, his expression unchanged. The emperor finally grew sick of waiting.

"You joined the Ho House so you could dismantle them from within, didn't you? If you're their master, you can gather information, obtain proof of their

opposition to the throne, have them tried for treason, and strip the entire family of its authority. That way you could keep them from competing for the crown. That was your plan, wasn't it?" the emperor pressed. "From that perspective, I can completely understand why you turned on me."

Rimi's heart was pounding. If Shusei agreed, Shohi would probably do everything in his power to convince the scholar to step down from his position and return.

I'm sure if anyone can move Master Shusei's heart, it's His Majesty.

Shusei was a kind man. If he had joined the Ho House for the emperor's sake but the emperor begged him to stop, then there was no way he'd be able to remain cold. It didn't matter what his objective was.

We might finally have him back... Finally!

Shohi pulled away from the handrail and faced Shusei with a piercing gaze.

"Answer me, Shusei."

The wind whipped across the outcropping, ruffling the men's sleeves. For a long time, they stared at each other.

Suddenly, Shusei smiled.

"Your Majesty, you left the capital the night before last, didn't you? By my estimation, you must have ridden all day and night to make it here," Shusei asked.

Confused by the strange question, Shohi answered honestly.

"That's right. What of it? What about my question?"

"Then you must not have heard. Unrest is setting in among the bureaucrats. By the time you return to the palace, they will be in a frenzy. After all, a rift has developed between the emperor and his chancellor, leading the chancellor to depart the capital."

"I'm not worried about that. I've kept things quiet so rumors don't start."

"Oh, let me assure you, the news is spreading, and the story is only growing

worse.”

“And what makes you say that?” Shohi demanded. He was growing agitated that Shusei wouldn’t give him the answer he wanted.

Shusei smiled slightly.

“Because three days ago, just before I departed, I arranged to ensure the rumor would spread. A bit of money for the guards. Some candy for the children. The handmaids love a bit of gossip. ‘Shu Kojin has turned his back on the emperor. Nobody knows if he’ll ever return to the palace. The divide between him and His Majesty is irreparable. It’s just a matter of time before he leaves his post.’ The bureaucrats who can tell where the wind is blowing are probably already deciding what they’ll do.”

What was he saying? Rimi and Shohi both looked at the scholar in a daze. Only Jotetsu kept a sharp look in his eyes.

“What are you saying, Shusei?” the emperor finally managed to ask in a strained voice. His mouth was twisted into a slight smile, as if someone had just told him a terrible joke. He clearly couldn’t believe what he was hearing. It seemed he was hoping that this was a terrible misunderstanding.

“Your Majesty, you believe I became master of the Ho House to protect your present situation. But you are sorely mistaken,” Shusei said. The answer was calm and brutal.

“That can’t be!” Rimi cried. “At Lady Renka’s estate, you said you were doing this for His Majesty!”

“A matter of interpretation,” Shusei said, turning to the consort. “I said I was doing this for His Majesty, and I meant it. The crown seems to weigh heavily on him, so I thought I would take it away. I will do everything in my power to push him off the throne so he can live freely. All for His Majesty.”

Rimi felt like she’d taken a blow to the head.

But then, is he really doing all of this to make His Majesty abdicate?

Shusei had claimed that he’d become master of the Ho House half out of revenge against Kojin and half for Shohi’s benefit. But Rimi had misunderstood

what he'd meant. It seemed he'd only meant that he would force Shohi to abdicate so he could live freely.

Ah. I see.

When Rimi had looked him in the eye back then, she'd felt a sense of unease. It was because she could sense him scheming. Shusei had picked up on her misunderstanding and exploited it.

The consort could hear something shatter inside her.

"Then why?" Shohi asked. There was a slight quiver in his voice. "Why did you join the Ho House?"

"Half to take revenge on Shu Kojin. The other half, for the stability of Konkoku."

"For the stability of..."

As Shohi realized Shusei was speaking the truth, his astonishment was quickly replaced with growing anger. Rage flickered in his beautiful eyes.

"Indeed. As I said before, I'll tell you everything," Shusei said. "I became lord of the Ho House to bring stability to Konkoku. It is why I chose to become your enemy."

Shohi clenched his fists. He was squeezing so hard that his knuckles were white and his hands were trembling.

"For the stability of Konkoku..." the emperor repeated.

"Correct," Shusei said, nodding with an almost cheerful expression. "No lies or tricks. That was why I did it."

Rimi could sense he was telling the truth. There was always something a little off when Shusei lied. There was none of that now.

"If you want stability, then why would you spread rumors and cause upheaval in the court?!" the emperor demanded.

Unable to stand it any longer, he raised his hand to slap Shusei viciously across the cheek. But just before the blow could land, Shusei grabbed Shohi's wrist.

“Is this how an emperor should behave?”

“Let go of me!”

Shusei violently tossed Shohi’s hand away, making the emperor stumble. Rimi rushed over to support him. As she held Shohi upright, she looked in disbelief at Shusei.

The emperor was trembling as Rimi held him in place. Whether out of anger or despair, she didn’t know.

“You’re more naive than Rimi is, Your Majesty. In my opinion, Shu Kojin has always been too soft. He made a mistake letting me, a child of the Ho House, live,” Shusei said coolly. “The Ho House has been presented with the perfect opportunity. One I’ve been waiting for.”

Rimi stared dumbfounded at the scholar. With each word, a chill ran down her spine. It was like his words were blades of ice, made to harm Shohi and chill him to the bone. At the same time, they filled Rimi with fear.

“Soon after you return to the palace, part of the court, including the Minister of Justice and the army generals, will be calling for your abdication. And with many believing that Shu Kojin has abandoned you, there will be more of them than ever. You can count on it.”

“Shusei, you wretch!” Shohi said through gritted teeth. “Jotetsu, cut him down.”

“Your Majesty! Stop!” Rimi said in a near shriek at the sound of the emperor’s agonized voice.

Jotetsu laid his hand on his sword’s grip.

“It’s fine! Do it! Kill him, Jotetsu!”

Shusei raised his hands slightly.

“I’d suggest you don’t. Members of the Ho House know I’m here,” he warned. “With my corpse to rally behind, the Ho House will be even more fervent in the call for your abdication. My death will buy the people’s sympathy as well. The Ho House will grow even more famous. And when Ho Neison is made emperor, he’ll have plenty of time to search for a successor.”

Jotetsu faltered. Shohi's jaw was clenched, but he didn't make any more emotion-fueled orders.

"How is any of this for Konkoku's benefit? You're just causing chaos," Shohi said.

"In my view, it's the best path toward stability."

The sea behind Shusei glittered, and the breeze blew past him to rustle his hair and clothes. There was a cheerfulness in everything he said.

Heartrending grief swelled deep inside Rimi. Shusei's actions didn't anger her. They just made her unbearably sad. It was the sadness of seeing a peerlessly beautiful flower begin to wilt.

"Master Shusei..." she said in a trembling voice, "at Renka's estate, I told you about my feelings. But you're destroying everything I feel for you."

At Renka's, she'd told the scholar she still loved him, yet he had utterly deceived her and had driven Shohi to a point of no escape. Whatever yearning she'd felt for him was shattered.

Shusei smiled.

"Good," he said delightedly before turning away.

Master Shusei...

His smile was like a physical blow. If he'd shattered her feelings before, now he was stomping on the remains.

Shusei quietly ascended the stairs. The moment he was out of sight, the strength seemed to leave Shohi, who fell to his knees. Rimi was unable to support him and sank to the ground alongside the emperor, but she refused to let go and held him close.

"Your Majesty, come on now," she said, attempting to encourage him. But there was no response. All Shohi could do was hang his head and moan painfully.

Jotetsu stared after Shusei with a despondent look.

There's a storm coming.

Shusei, as master of the Ho House, had announced it. It was an outright declaration of war. Before long, the war cry of rebellion would ring out in the capital.

“I need to return to the palace. Quickly,” Shohi whispered in Rimi’s arms. “I have Kojin and Renka. I’m not going to let him do as he pleases. I have to hurry.”

At that moment...

It is decided.

Something like a voice rang out through the air. Rimi jumped and looked up to see Tama. She was standing atop the balcony with legs outstretched and her fur puffed up and rippling in the wind. Her thin mustache swayed softly. She was staring at Shohi with eyes bluer than the ocean.



Was that Tama's voice?

The wind whipped across the platform, making Rimi's hair splay and twist.
The bright sunlight reflected off the water.

Shohi mumbled to himself as if possessed.

"To the palace," he said.

Afterword

Hello everyone! Miri Mikawa here. As I mentioned in the last afterword, I thought I'd be able to get the next volume out without delay, and I'm relieved to say I did. And like last time, Kojin continued to be a total pain while I was writing this volume.

In other news, with this new volume being published, we've been given a voiced character promo! I never get to do this sort of thing, so I'm so grateful. I'm completely enchanted by Shusei and Shohi's voices. When they let me listen to the raw audio, I just kept going, "It's so good... It's so good... It's so good..." The voices were so wonderful, it was almost torture. Apparently, the editors were making a big deal out of me sighing. I think you'll get a lot out of it, so I hope you'll give it a listen.

To my editor: as always, thank you for everything. Truly. I'm well aware of how rare it is to still get this much support this far into a series. I can't be grateful enough. I'll do whatever I can to write something good for you. I'm sure I'll continue to need a lot of help, so I look forward to working with you.

To Kasumi Nagi, my illustrator: thank you again for all the amazing art. I was so surprised to find Mars lurking on the cover of the last volume. When I see little details like that, it makes me think I need to buckle down and match that effort. I'm truly grateful to be having you draw for me. You made Shohi and Rimi look amazing yet again with this volume. I was so excited to see Hakurei in color for the first time too. Anyways, it's all been beautiful!

And finally, to all my readers: I never would've been able to release this many books if not for you. I hope you enjoyed this volume, even if only a bit. Our story is reaching its climax! Where do you think it'll go from here? I hope you'll stick around and find out.

Miri Mikawa



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Culinary Chronicles of the Court Flower: Volume 9

by Miri Mikawa

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Ebook edition 1.0: March 2023